

# SANDBLADE

HORROR FICTION - DARK VERSE - MACABRE ENTERTAINMENT

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**GWENDOLYN KISTE / SCARLETT R. ALGEE / JAMIE R WARGO /  
JOSHUA HIBBARD / LARRY HINKLE / WILLIAM R. SOLDAN /  
IAN SPUTNIK / TAWNY KIPPHORN / AUSTIN MURATORI /  
MIRACLE AUSTIN & MICHELLE L. ANDERSON**

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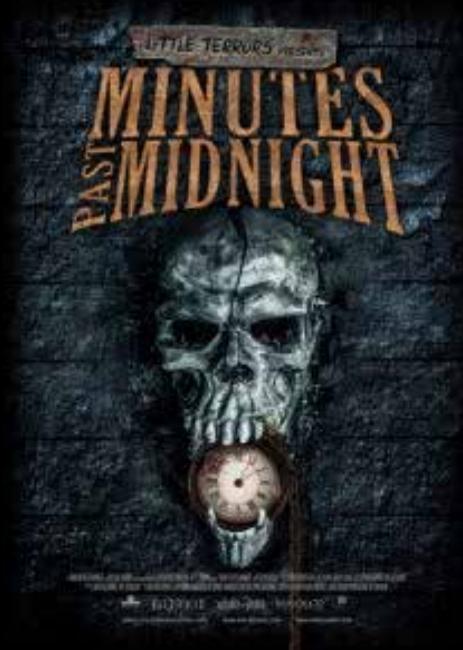
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**Publisher**  
Sanitarium Press

**Editor**  
Barry Skelhorn

**Contributors**

Gwendolyn Kiste  
Scarlett R. Algee  
Jamie R Wargo  
Joshua Hibbard  
Larry Hinkle  
William R. Soldan  
Ian Sputnik  
Tawny Kipphorn  
Austin Muratori  
Miracle Austin  
Michelle L. Anderson

**Heaven of Horror:**

ScreamQueen  
HorrorDiva

**Faculty Members:**

Dr. Sputnik  
Dr. Muratori  
Dr. Soldan  
Dr. Algee  
Dr. Marceau  
Dr. Warra

**Publisher Media**

Eye Trauma Press  
2 Cyprus Row  
27a Cyprus Road  
Burgess Hill, West Sussex  
RH15 8DX, United Kingdom  
E. hello@eyetraumapress.com

**Cover**  
By Grandfailure



# ISSUE FIFTY

Dear Reader,

Sanitarium Magazine is now closed for submissions. However we will get back to everyone who has submitted within the next 8 weeks.

This our 50th Issue we will be our last for while, as we take a short break.

Over the past 4 years we have showcased 555 stories over the 50 issues. There have been ups and downs as with any project but overall the horror community has been welcoming and helpful with comments and suggestions on how to make Sanitarium better.

Thank you again and for the time being, this ghost train, is one ride that I have found terrifying in places but I wouldn't change a damn thing.

Also thank you to the Facility Team who have helped in more ways than they know.

Barry Skelhorn  
Editor-in-Chief



/Sanitariummagazine



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# THE WICKED LIBRARY

Go ahead...leave the lights on.



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Once Lost, Gone  
Forever

by Gwendolyn Kiste

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#21978

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CASE #: 21978



# ONCE LOST, GONE FOREVER

BY GWENDOLYN KISTE

Even before we try with a person, we know we can do it. We know in that blind way you trust how each day trudges after the next.

The bonfire flickers toward the summer constellations, and a battered CD player intones a lackluster Pink Floyd song. Something off *Animals*, not *Dark Side* or *The Wall*.

A half dozen people we pretend are our friends—the ones who on most days are close enough to count—prance around the flames, gleeful pagans armed with barley ambrosia.

"They'd probably stuff a wicker effigy if they could," I whisper to Melissa as we recline on the ground next to a few drunken corpses.

Like schoolchildren on a fieldtrip, she and I hold hands, though we don't need the tether to make the magic work. But this moment tests us, and we want every advantage we can get.

We choose the tallest girl of the group, mostly because her form is so gangly. If we can grasp her, we can

grasp any of them.

They practice their wannabe Kumbaya hippie dance as they circle the fire once. They circle twice. On the third orbit, the girl's place is vacant.

No one reacts. Melissa and I smile.

The calliope rotates again, and the girl returns.

Another revolution, and she's gone.

Back and forth. There and not there. Six figures around the bonfire, five figures around the bonfire, six figures, five figures. So long as we keep her in our mind—the facsimile of her gawky shape projected against a blank screen—the rest of the world spins on, unaware. Even she seems oblivious to where she goes, her voice chanting on, singing a verse, missing a verse, picking up the chorus again.

But if either Melissa or I lets go of the girl, go she will, and our would-be friends will see it too.

We hold on so tight our hands bleed.

\*\*\*

I see Melissa for the first time on the playground. Day one kindergarten, and we're arrayed in our Sunday best on a Monday morning, both squirming in the tight seams and scratchy fabrics.

She with her flaxen hair and daisy white skin in a black velvet dress.

Me and my dark locks and caramel complexion clad in a linen white jumper.

The schoolyard line takes form, and we stand side by side, pint-sized photo negatives. That's the moment we know, even without saying a word to each other.

This is the girl I want for my friend.

\*\*\*

Sixteen, and who we are crystallizes like sugar in a boiling kettle.

Other girls trade in giggles and gossip. Melissa and I deal in silence, one trinket at a time.

The first thing we make vanish—a piece of petrified potpourri that resembles a face—occurs by accident in April that year. So far, we can't do anything besides intuit the other's thoughts, and according to our parents, that doesn't make us so unique in the arena of adolescent estrogen.

But the potpourri we playfully accuse of watching us evaporates the moment we banish it in tandem. Our plumb terror boomerangs it back to us, and we sit, examining the retrieved relic for hours.

It looks the same. Only we know the potpourri left at all, and only it knows where it went.

Melissa and I don't speak of the occurrence for weeks, mostly because neither of us can think of anything to say about it, other than the fact it happened.

\*\*\*

Sophomore year ends, and I'm happy to see it disappear. By fall, the other students will forget the rumors about me and every member of the swim team.

When you're the only one in the hallways like you, it doesn't matter what you do and what you don't do. People say something often enough, and the echo makes it true.

Melissa laughs and tells me if I did sleep with them, whoever "they" are, she hopes I enjoyed it. She's the little singing bluebird to my surly condor, and I love her to pieces for it.

For our first weekend of freedom, we go to Niagara Falls with her parents. In one of the souvenir shops that swell with kitsch and refuse, we buy a gargantuan shot glass that's got five lines and a little saying to go with every gradation.

Shot one: Friendly Fire

Shot two: In the Trenches

Shot three: Bouncing Betty

Shot four: Blitzkrieg Blowup

Shot five: Atomic Blast

When we return home, I host a Saturday night party in the shot glass's honor. With our pagan friends cheering us on, I down eight ounces of Grey Goose on an empty stomach, and Melissa follows my exploit with an equal serving of Maker's Mark.

To our grand disappointment, my mom retrieves us before anything bad happens. "Do you want the neighbors to call the cops?" she asks.

"Let 'em," I slur and edge toward the window, eager to caterwaul anyone who's listening. Melissa giggles and crawls after me.

My mother hauls us toward her before we can holler. "So you want a weekend alone with those guards at the detention center?"

I collapse on my side. "No," I say and mean it.

Melissa frowns. "No, ma'am."

After several bouts of retching, we both land on the futon in the spare bedroom, but neither of us can sleep.

Melissa sighs. "Inali?"

I turn toward her.

"I want to do it again." She points at my mom's doll collection on the wall.

"Okay," I say, "but she'll kill us if something happens to those."

Starting on the top shelf, we send out and tow back each porcelain-faced monstrosity.

We're on the pig-tailed redhead with the plaid dress when stealthy as an assassin, my mom strolls into the room to check on us, and we lose our grip on the doll.

She examines us. "Why are you two girls still awake?"

We shrug.

"Go to sleep," she says and retreats to bed without glancing at the wall with a now vacant spot.

Melissa and I look at each other.

"Let's try to bring it back," she says.

In our minds, we return to a blank barrier and let the doll materialize in front of it. Then we lasso the image and yank it toward us. The doll crashes into the room with an arm through its heart, a leg missing, and the hair matted and tangled.

We send the thing away again.

"Once lost," I say, "it's gone forever."

\*\*\*

Over a July Fourth bonfire, Melissa and I practice for the first time on a person.

After the flames and Pink Floyd wane, she pairs off with some senior guy from the West End, and I leave with his seventeen-year-old friend named Bastien. He and I spend two days in his bedroom listening to Peter Frampton on vinyl and talking about how hard it is to buy parts for record players these days. I forget everything else except the sweet scent of sweat mingling with discount store cologne.

His parents never notice us, not even when we sneak into the kitchen after midnight like ravenous gremlins, gorging on neon orange cheese curls and a kaleidoscope of cheap candy.

But on the second day, his older brother Thad notices me. Notices me while I'm skulking around the refrigerator for scraps. I try to sidestep him, but his hulking figure broadens, and I'm trapped.

"Some friends of mine told me about you," he says and smiles. "They say you're a real good time."

I glare at him and his patchwork face and hope I'm not living with my parents when I'm his age and old enough to know better.

"Inali?" Bastien stands on the stairwell landing. "You alright?"

I wriggle around Thad, my shoulder stabbing into his chest as I pass.

"Nice work, little brother," Thad says and motions toward me. "You ought to share some time."

I wish him away the same way I vanquished the potpourri and the doll, but it does no good. Melissa's not there to help.

I walk home in the rain because my mom's car is in the shop again, so as always, she's pilfered my ride.

At the house, after finding nothing's moved or changed since I left, I call Melissa on her cell phone. I never admit I'm jealous she's got the latest Nokia, and my parents won't proffer me anything except a used pager I bury inside my dresser in protest. But on most days, I have a car, and Melissa doesn't, so between the two of us, we're the yin and yang of contented adolescence.

"This new guy's a total bore," she says and I imagine her blue eyes disappearing under her eyelids as she speaks. "And the only thing I can think about is all the good you and I could be doing."

"Like what?" I ask.

"Imagine the bad guys we could get," she says, practically panting. "We could clear every prison in America."

"Yeah, but what if somebody's wrongly convicted?" I shake my head, and I bet even over the phone, she can see it. "We need to catch someone in the act. Superheroes always do that."

Melissa hesitates. "Like a mugger?"

"Not a mugger," I say. "Something worse."

That night, my mom drops me at the bowling alley, and I tell her we'll walk back to Melissa's house for the night.

Inside, Melissa's already waiting at a table in the center of the room.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

She nods, just as a man who might be thirty or forty or fifty arrives at the table. He solicits our ages and seems excited when in unison, we say sixteen.

Ten minutes later, we're at the liquor store, and ten minutes after that, we're ratcheting toward the fake trees outside of town. Of course, they're not really fake trees. It's just the way the headlights reflect on the pine needles that makes them look one-dimensional like some exquisite Bob Ross painting you know you'll never duplicate.

We sit in the guy's pickup truck under the prickly branches, him in the driver's seat, me in the middle, and Melissa next to me.

"So," he says and squints at us with glee, "one at a time or tag team?"

"Neither," I say and adjust the radio, uncovering Blue Oyster Cult. "We're just here to drink."

He gapes at us. "That's all fine and good for starters, but you two aren't so naïve to think that's all we're doing."

"We're not naïve," I say. "We're just not interested."

"Not interested?"

"No," I say.

"No," Melissa repeats.

"What did you think we'd do out here? Talk philosophy?"

We give him a chance and say no again. But he grabs me by the hair and issues a nauseating command. Melissa and I smile, and in an instant, he vanishes. We keep smiling until we realize we're in the middle of a bucolic wasteland and the car's a stick shift and neither of us can drive it.

We walk home. It takes us three hours with heels and blisters, but we manage.

Along the way, I craft our alibis. "If somebody asks us, we tell them he pulled the old 'put out or get out.' What happened after that is none of our business."

"I wonder what did happen," she says. "Where did he go?"

I tell her if Mr. McMiller, our physics instructor, is right, energy's not created or destroyed. So our bowling shirt pal is someplace or another.

Melissa frowns. "Wherever he went, do you think he's nicer there?"

"I would hope so," I say. "Otherwise, our work's for nothing."

The Monday morning papers report a missing person, mostly because nothing else happens in our county, so a vanishing townie is major hearsay. We're almost disappointed when no one questions us about him.

\*\*\*

The next time, we use my car. My mom's station wagon is back from the mechanic, so Melissa and I cruise almost every Friday night.

Most of the time, the guys just buy us some booze and try to cajole us into sexual favors. We decline, and after a spew of profanity, they revoke the cheap whiskey or off-brand forty or whatever substandard aphrodisiac they procured for us. Then we drop them somewhere in town and crawling out of the car, they call us bitches or teases or whores and we laugh all the way home.

But sometimes they're not so polite.

The second guy rips my blouse before he disappears.

"And that was one of my favorites," I say and do my best to stitch the seams back together.

The third one's out on parole for what he did to a twenty-two-year-old three counties over. He served eighteen months. The girl'll serve life.

"Are there really this many awful people in the world?" Melissa asks as she climbs into the now vacant passenger seat.

"I guess so," I say, "but it also probably has to do with personality. Most guys willing to buy booze for underage girls aren't the most standup people."

We always pull over for the main event. If nothing else, it makes it more ceremonious.

"Plus, I wouldn't want to veer into oncoming traffic," I say.

"Or hit a deer," Melissa adds.

Cleanup takes care of itself, so afterwards, we don't worry about dropping spare quarters in the carwash vacuums to erase the crime scene. I do buy an extra air freshener since the guys we pick up always wear too much musk and I don't want Bastien thinking I'm cheating.

We take a break in early August, so Melissa can spend a weekend with her bore and I can raid Bastien's records.

Vinyl on the turntable, I descend into the lyrics about unreachable days while Bastien ensnares me in gasps and whispers.

"Thad got a job," he tells me after we finish, mostly because he's got nothing else to say. "He's working at the detention center."

Shuddering, I roll on my side and stare at the wall. "He'll fit right in with the other guards."

"Inali?" Bastien's voice sears through the gloom, and the lilt of my name gives me chills.

I look over my shoulder at him.

"I love you," he says and I wonder aloud if he means it.

It rains the second morning, and while Bastien and I forage leftovers in the refrigerator's haphazardly arranged plastic containers, Thad creeps into the room.

"I'm tired of this shitty weather," he says and looks at me. "Maybe Pocahontas here can do a reverse rain dance, and give us a sunny day."

Again, I wish him away, but nothing happens, so I just scowl.

"Doesn't it bother you to hear your brother talk like that?" I ask Bastien when we're alone again.

"Sure, it bothers me, but if I tell him, he won't stop." He shakes his head. "Besides, he compared you to a Disney princess. You should be flattered."

"No, I shouldn't," I say, certain at last how Bastien feels about me.

\*\*\*

After a day and a half, Melissa and I tire of the boys and return to our evening drives.

At an ugly honky tonk at the state line, we find our fourth mark. Mullet. Dirty fingernails. The whole unkempt get-up. He clammers into the passenger's seat, though we don't invite him.

But he's not the same as the others. He doesn't want flesh. He wants blood. We don't realize it until we're on a dim stretch of county highway, looking for an alcove where we can stop.

"You two are awfully pretty," he says and I swear I see the saliva drip down his chin as he pulls out a knife.

Before I can warn her, he clocks Melissa, and she's out cold in the back seat, so I'm alone to fend him off. As the car swerves to the shoulder, he cuts my arms and goes at my throat and face, but I spit and flail and pull the keys from the ignition and jab his eyes. He curses and tells me how he's going to dice me into little pieces and they'll never find me, at least not all of me. I kick him with the edge of my heel, and then he's out too, and I get the knife and finish him.

There's blood everywhere and I drag Melissa out and when she wakes again, we dissolve the whole thing, tires and all, and walk home. Walk fifteen miles because we can't bring ourselves to use her cell phone and call our parents.

But my mom's awake when we get there, and she instantly wants to know what happened to us and where the car went.

"Some guy jumped us," I say. "Hit her. Cut me. He wanted the car, so we let him have it."

Closer to true than we expected.

My parents call her parents on the way to the hospital. They don't give us time to change, which is awful, since most of the red on my dress doesn't belong to me. But no one asks whose blood is whose, and after the nurses give us gowns, Melissa and I place our clothes in the corner and send the satin to live with the car. That forces our parents to bring us new outfits, even if they're baffled as to where our dresses went.

I need seventeen stitches, and Melissa's got a concussion, so they keep us overnight for observation.

We share a room and watch reruns of *Beretta*.

"Hopefully, they'll find the car," my mom says, and I think how someone will probably find it someday, maybe a million miles away on another planet where girls who can manipulate things aren't so rare at all.

\*\*\*

"I don't want to do it anymore," Melissa says when we get out of the hospital. "It's too dangerous."

I nod, and that's the last we discuss it. I comfort myself and think how it's not so bad. We banished a quartet of piss and misogyny, and that accomplishment's enough to make anyone proud.

For the rest of the summer, Melissa and I have to walk everywhere since my parents won't buy me another car until they get the insurance money from the old one. The police ask us a lot of questions like where we were when it happened and what the guy looks like. Our answers are a sea of truths and half-truths and outright lies, but we keep it consistent and that's all that matters.

At the end of August, Melissa and I eschew all the farewell summer parties until Bastien begs us to come to his place. His parents are out of town, and Thad's working the midnight shift, so he's hosting half the high school in his basement.

My mom drops us off late. Melissa and I each have a drink, but we quit after one since we're both still on painkillers and neither of us wants the interaction.

At my side in the dated rec room, Melissa's mingling with her cad while I whisper to Bastien, something about a Motown record we should find. A squeak on the stairs, and Thad creeps against the paneling, a grin on

his face like he just found a peephole into a nudie parlor.

His complexion suddenly wan, Bastien advances toward him. "I thought you were working late."

"They didn't need me tonight. But it looks like I'm needed here." A hand across his mouth, Thad feigns surprise. "I think you're drinking, little brother. And I think as a servant of Oakview Detention Center, I owe it to the authorities to report you."

No one moves since it's already too late to hide the bottles and bottles of booze.

"Please," Bastien says, one leg shaking like a nervous dog, "just let this one go."

"I might be persuaded to forget it," Thad says, "if I get something in exchange."

We wait as he calculates his price.

With a sinister smirk, he points at me. "I want twenty minutes alone with that one."

I laugh. "No way."

"Then you and your friends are all getting locked up," he says and surveys the room. "And I'll still have my pick over you ladies. I'll just be on the clock for it."

From his bulging pocket, he pulls out one of those giant '90s cell phones, the kind that would sink you straight to the bottom of the ocean if you didn't surrender it on the plunge.

Bastien mutters something like 'no' or 'don't' but his voice fades before he can commit either way.

The whole room goes quiet, and everyone stares at the floor, waiting for me to move.

"So it's now or later, girlie," Thad says, and I realize no one's going to do anything, no one's going to tell the creep where he should go.

No one except Melissa. We don't have time to think of what might happen, of what it might mean. On instinct, we grab the other's hand, and in less than a spark, he's gone. Though they have no reason, the pagans turn to us, and they know. His image in our mind is lost, so we don't try to bring him back again, even though our lives might be easier if we do.

Nobody calls the police, but some of the girls start to cry and like frightened gentlemen, a few guys usher them outside.

Our ride arrives at two in the morning. Melissa and I don't speak on the way home.

We have nothing left to say.

\*\*\*

There's no trial because nobody—not our parents, not our friends, and certainly no magistrate—wants to put us in the same room again.

They do something worse instead.

Melissa's parents find jobs out of state. My mom doesn't tell me until they've already been gone a week. I sneak a call to Melissa's cell phone but it's disconnected.

So I do what I'm told, and I go to college. I get married. I get divorced.

But after almost ten years, that summer still swirls around me, a specter draped in chains to hold me back. At last, I track down Melissa and send a note. A week later, she mails me a card with a couple photos of her kids, all girls, who are the cutest little Aryans you ever did see. I write back and include a picture of my six-year-old daughter Shana who's not so blond but cuter for it.

As I open a fresh batch of pictures, Shana crawls onto my lap and points at Melissa's daughter, Ashley. "I like her outfit."

I examine the photo. It's a hand-me-down dress. The same black velvet Melissa wore a quarter century ago on that playground.

"When am I going to meet her?" Shana asks as though the family lives next door and I should have already introduced them.

I glance at her. "How are you so sure you want to meet her?"

"How do you know Monday comes after Sunday?" she asks. "You just know."

I think of what I know too.

I know I still have that white linen jumper from grade school, and I know Shana would fit into it.

I know from her letters that Melissa has an extra room where we can stay anytime.

I know it's been too long since I've seen my friend.

Shana blinks up at me. "So can I meet her, Mommy?"

I smile.

The End.

# CASE #21978

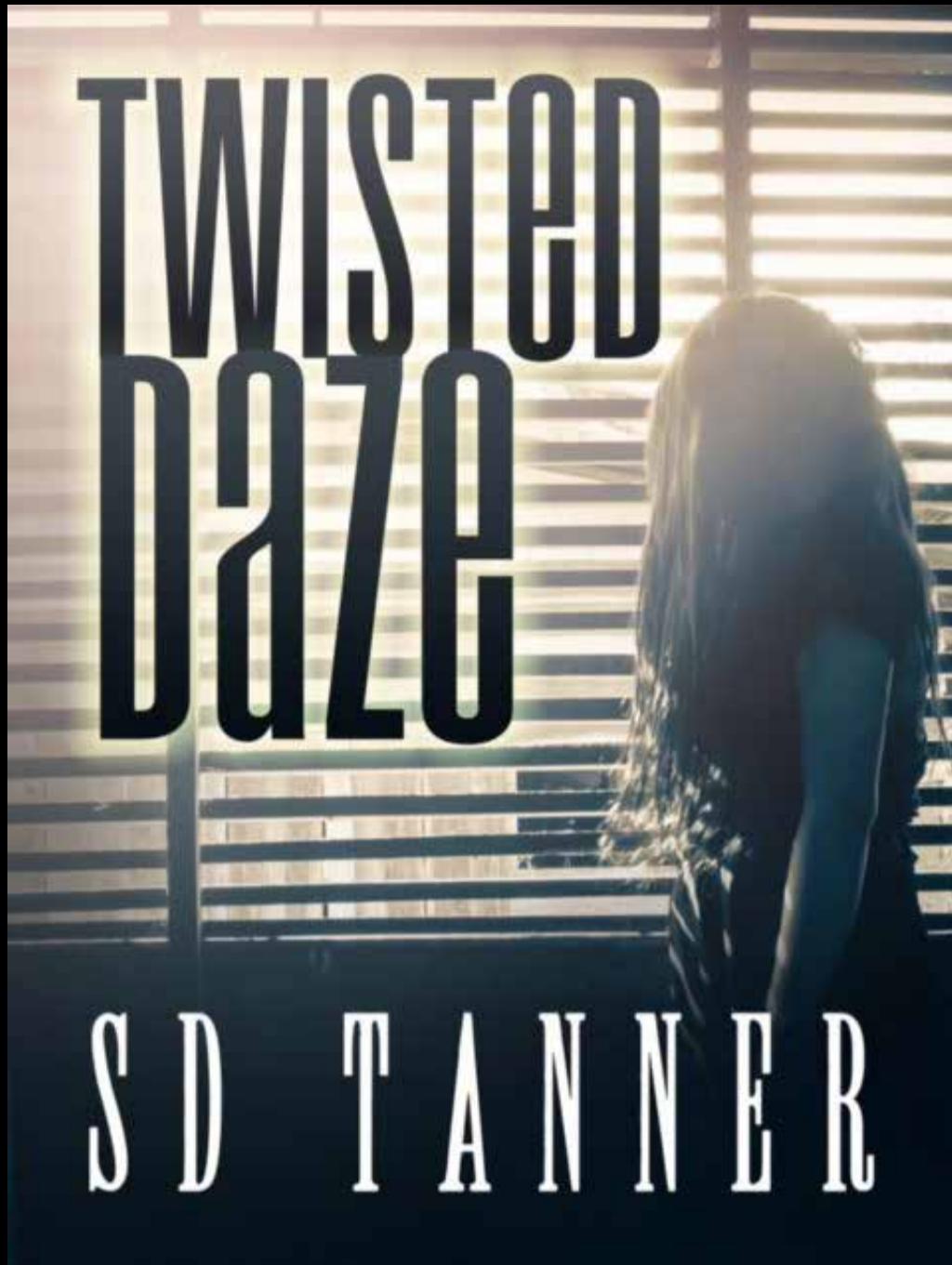
## ONCE LOST, GONE FOREVER

### BY GWENDOLYN KISTE



Gwendolyn Kiste is a speculative fiction writer based in Pennsylvania. Her stories have appeared in *Nightmare*, *Shimmer*, *LampLight*, and *Interzone* as well as Flame Tree Publishing's *Chilling Horror Short Stories* anthology. She currently resides on an abandoned horse farm with her husband, two cats, and not nearly enough ghosts. You can find her online at [gwendolynkiste.com](http://gwendolynkiste.com) and on Twitter (@GwendolynKiste).

"Once Lost, Gone Forever" first appeared in *Electric Spec*.



"Is the Ouija board a toy or a tool? After moving to a new town, Serena plays the game with devastating consequences. While her life and health slowly unravel, women in her small community are being murdered in their homes.

Struggling to find her feet, she's warned time and again that someone or something is on her tail. Women are dying and they all look like her. The police aren't closing in on anyone, leaving every woman fearful of their own home. When the truth is finally revealed, Serena learns nothing was as it seemed, and that sanity is a hard won state of mind."

Available at  
**amazon**



# Seeing Shadows

by Scarlett R. Algee

Physician: Dr. Lotherton  
8715-AED19

#19526

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**CASE #: 19526**



## **SEEING SHADOWS**

**BY SCARLETT R. ALGEE**

I still remember the first time I saw one.

I couldn't have been more than six, maybe seven. It was my first day out of school for the summer and my granny was dying in our second upstairs bedroom.

I wasn't supposed to be in there. She'd taken sick the night before and Mama, knowing what was coming, had banished me to the back yard to play all day while she and Daddy and my Uncle John Ray hovered around Granny's deathbed and talked in whispers. I didn't know why they were so quiet or what the faint, funny smell was that hung all in the house, but a boy can only play by himself so long, and after a while I just came back inside.

I could hear Granny breathing before I got to the foot of the stairs: start and stop, start and stop, a rattly sound that carried. Somebody was crying. I think it was Daddy.

I'd crept out of bed enough at night to know where the stairs didn't creak. I went up and peeked in the door. Mama stood to one side of the bed, reaching down to stroke the wisps of gray hair back from Granny's forehead. Daddy sat in a straight chair on the other side with Uncle John Ray standing beside him, wedged into the corner with his hands tucked into his armpits. Granny was turning ashen, skin stretched right across her cheekbones, breathing hard and fast.

She took in a shuddery breath and let it out slow, and I saw the shadow.

At least it looked like a shadow. It worked out of her mouth, out of her nose, a cloud of black particles like dust. It slid out of her with that last breath, trailing ragged streamers, and I screamed.

Uncle John Ray swore. Daddy bent over in his chair with his face in his hands. Mama ran to me and swept me into her arms and pressed me into her.

"Hush, Jimmy Earl. Hush, Jimmy Earl. Hush."

The black cloud swirled up to the ceiling and disappeared. I kept screaming. They hadn't seen it.

\*\*\*

In the middle of August, Uncle John Ray took heat stroke out in the cotton field.

He was muttering and twitching when Daddy wrestled him into the house and onto the couch. Froth flecked his lips. Mama yelled at me to go get cold water; she and Daddy got John Ray out of his clothes and half wrapped in a wet sheet.

Daddy took off to town after the doctor. Mama laid a wet towel across Uncle John Ray's forehead and started sponging him down with a rag. He stopped muttering and got still, but the twitch stayed in his fingers: I fanned him with one of the cardboard fans the funeral home had put out for Granny's service, and tried to hold his hand, but his skin was red and dry and hellfire hot, and he shook too bad for me to keep a grip. His hands were huge, compared to mine.

We fanned and sponged. Uncle John Ray shook harder, his eyelids spasming open to show white, and Mama started to cry. He was her brother.

She changed the towel across his forehead and he growled in his throat, then whined. It was a high hoarse sound, and while Mama tapped his face and made shushing noises, his shadow started drifting out.

I dropped my fan and watched. It was darker than Granny's had been, the tiny black motes more tightly packed. It moved slower too, out a little and back in. Fighting. Hesitating.

John Ray's whine cut off all at once, and in the silence his shadow swept out of him. It broke free in a rush and hurried upward, hovered at the ceiling, vanished.

He wasn't breathing anymore. I clenched my jaw and curled my fingers into fists. This time Mama was the one who screamed, but I knew she hadn't seen that one either.

\*\*\*

There were no deaths for a while after that. I went to school and played baseball and played with Rufus,

our old red coonhound, and almost forgot about seeing shadows.

The weekend after I turned ten, Rufus was hit by a county truck. The driver never stopped. I crawled into the ditch where Rufus had landed and wrapped my arms around his bloody head and begged him not to die.

He'd never been good at listening.

For a long time I sat down there holding his head, waiting to see the shadow crawl out of him and fly away.

It never happened. I didn't know why not.

\*\*\*

My friends and I made our baseball field from a narrow empty lot next door to the Baptist church. The preacher was a tall big-boned man everybody called Brother Paul, and sometimes on Sunday afternoons after church he'd come out to the edge of our lot and watch our games, with his tie loose around his neck and his suit coat slung over his arm.

Seeing him out there one Sunday after Rufus died got me thinking about the shadows. When our game was over, I walked up to him and said I needed to ask a question.

His eyebrows went up--my people were Presbyterian when we bothered to be--but he let me come sit in the church to talk. It was a cool dark place, and rainbows striped the floor from the little colored glass windows.

Brother Paul listened while I told him about what I'd seen from Granny and Uncle John Ray. I was sure he'd bring up hell--Daddy always said Baptists were awful keen on hell--but he just made this low rumbling noise in his throat, like he was thinking about it and working up his mouth. Daddy always said Baptists liked to talk, too.

"Well, Jimmy Earl," he said after some quiet, "I can't rightly claim to have answers to all of God's mysteries, but it may just be you saw their souls going up to heaven. The Good Book says we flee like shadows. They were in a hurry to get home."

"What about Rufus?" I asked.

Brother Paul went quiet, then rumbled again. His shoulders worked under his shirt. Finally he said, "Well...there's no need for dogs to have souls, Jimmy Earl." He chewed his lip. "They can't sin. They don't have to be saved."

That wasn't an answer. I got up and walked home.

\*\*\*

But I thought about souls a lot after that, especially the ones I didn't see.

Like Daddy. The year I turned fourteen, the cotton failed. He plowed it under and went to work at the cannery out from the other side of town, catching a ride back and forth every day with a member of the Baptist church who worked the same shift. When a massive heart attack dropped Daddy in his tracks mid-shift one day, I was in third period English. I didn't get to see his soul-shadow leave, didn't get to see if it rushed up or sank down.

I didn't know if they ever went down, toward hell. For Mama's sake I tried not to think about that.

Mama sold the plot we'd grown cotton on and went to work at the cannery. I started working after school and on weekends for Seth Carver, who grew wheat instead of cotton; he gave me odd jobs while I waited to get old enough to drive a grain truck, and I tried not to get caught staring at his daughter.

She almost made me forget about seeing shadows, too.

\*\*\*

I was sixteen when the accident happened.

Seth and two of his farmhands were in a silo walking down the wheat when they broke through the crusted top layer and sank into the settled grain underneath. Six hours later when the rest of us got them out, they were blue-faced and limp, with wheat kernels packed in their mouths.

For weeks afterward I could barely sleep. I kept imagining sinking into loose wheat like quicksand. I wondered if they'd screamed, or if they'd prayed. I wondered if their shadows had been able to get free, and if they'd risen to the ceiling of the silo, or if the soul dust had been lost, scattered in the wheat.

\*\*\*

The first two times I asked Seth Carver's daughter Audrine out on a date, she said no. The third time I asked, she said, "Well, if it'll keep you from looking so pitiful, I'll go."

Six months after our first date, when I asked her to marry me, she said yes. She didn't say whether I looked pitiful or not.

I was nineteen when we got married. Audrine was twenty. A year later, our Sally was born, and as I sat next to Audrine's hospital bed and held my daughter in my arms, searching her little scrunched face for some trace of myself and finding only my stick-straight eyebrows, I found myself thinking that this was it. No more death, no more shadows. Audrine's mother had held onto her land. I had a good job driving a grain truck. I had a wife, a daughter, a future.

I should have known it wouldn't last.

\*\*\*

When Sally started to cough, we thought it was just a cold. She was eight months old; the weather had been damp.

When she started whooping, we knew we were wrong.

Audrine took her into town to the doctor. Sally got her nose swabbed and her finger pricked. She had a fever. She got medicine.

She didn't get better.

I'll never forget that Tuesday night. Audrine was cleaning up from supper and I was in our bedroom, standing over Sally's crib, watching her fitful sleep. Lord knew none of us had gotten much of that lately.

I tickled her chin. She hiccuped awake and started to cough and cough, and suddenly I was remembering Granny and her death rattle. Uncle John Ray's too-hot skin. Their souls coming out of their bodies in shadows

and disappearing in front of my eyes.

Sally gasped in air with that horrible high sound, like Uncle John Ray had made. Her little lips were gray, drool slipping from her mouth. I tried to sit her up and thump her chest.

Then I saw her shadow.

It wasn't tattered like Granny's, or sleek dust like John Ray's. The darkness seeping out of Sally's mouth was almost solid, black as soot. It didn't stream off. It struggled, sliding back when she gasped again. It didn't want to leave.

I couldn't let it leave.

I laid her down and grabbed a pillow off the bed and put it over Sally's mouth. I pressed down. I had to keep her soul in.

"Sally?" Audrine walked into the room. "Jimmy E--ohmygod!"

Audrine shrieked and threw herself on me. "I'm trying to help!" I shouted, but she wouldn't let me shake her off. She clawed my face and snatched the pillow away, and I watched Sally's soul-shadow thrash out of her mouth and break away, up, up, faster than any I'd seen, and it was gone.

"I was trying to help," I said weakly. "I was holding it in. She could've lived if you'd let me hold it in."

Audrine slapped me and ran from the room. When the sheriff arrived, I told him about my baby's soul. He just looked at me with pity in his eyes and reached to handcuff me.

"I was trying to help," I said. "I was trying to help."

\*\*\*

I got sent to a psychiatric hospital. Audrine got a divorce.

It's not too bad here. They listen to me when I want to talk about the shadows. About how I was trying to save my baby girl. I do what I'm told. I don't bother anybody. I take the pills. I get to use a spoon that's metal and not plastic.

Anything can hold an edge.

I made up my mind when Mama visited and told me Audrine had remarried. I don't know what I'll do yet. Maybe my throat. Probably my throat. I think that would take a long time.

Maybe I'll get to see it. I want to see it, the shadow coming out of me, see how thick my soul dust is. See where it goes and if Brother Paul was right.

I want to see my baby girl again.

I want to see if everybody really hurried to get home.

The End.

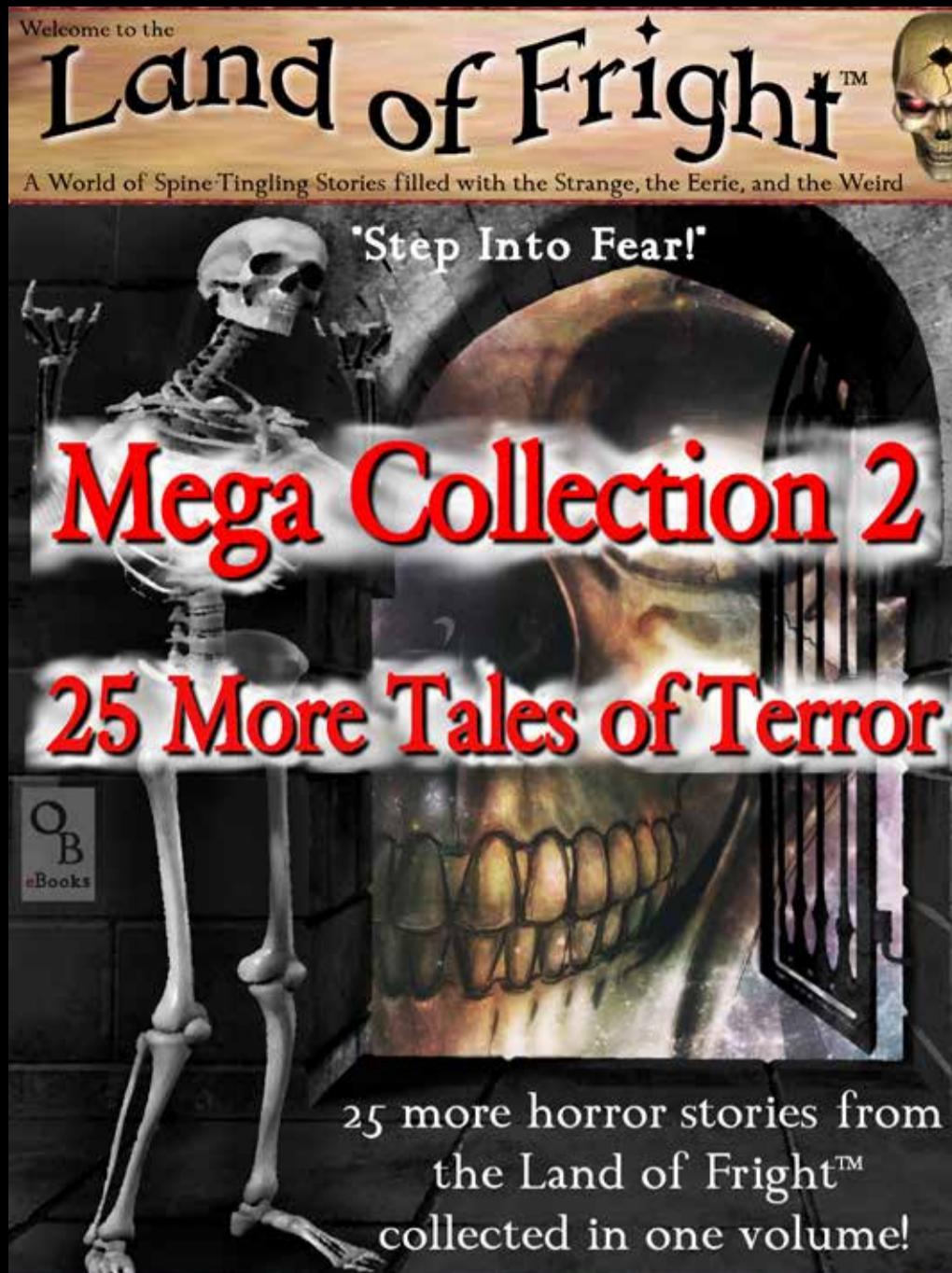
# CASE #19526

## SEEING SHADOWS

BY SCARLETT R. ALGEE



Scarlett R. Algee's work has appeared in several places, including Sanitarium Magazine, Sirens Call, Body Parts Magazine, and the recent anthologies A Lovely Darkness and Black Candy. When not reading, writing, editing, or performing her duties as an avatar of Nyarlathotep, she lives in the wilds of Tennessee with a Hound of Tindalos cleverly disguised as a beagle. Find her online at [scarletralgee.wordpress.com](http://scarletralgee.wordpress.com) or on Twitter at @scarletralgee.

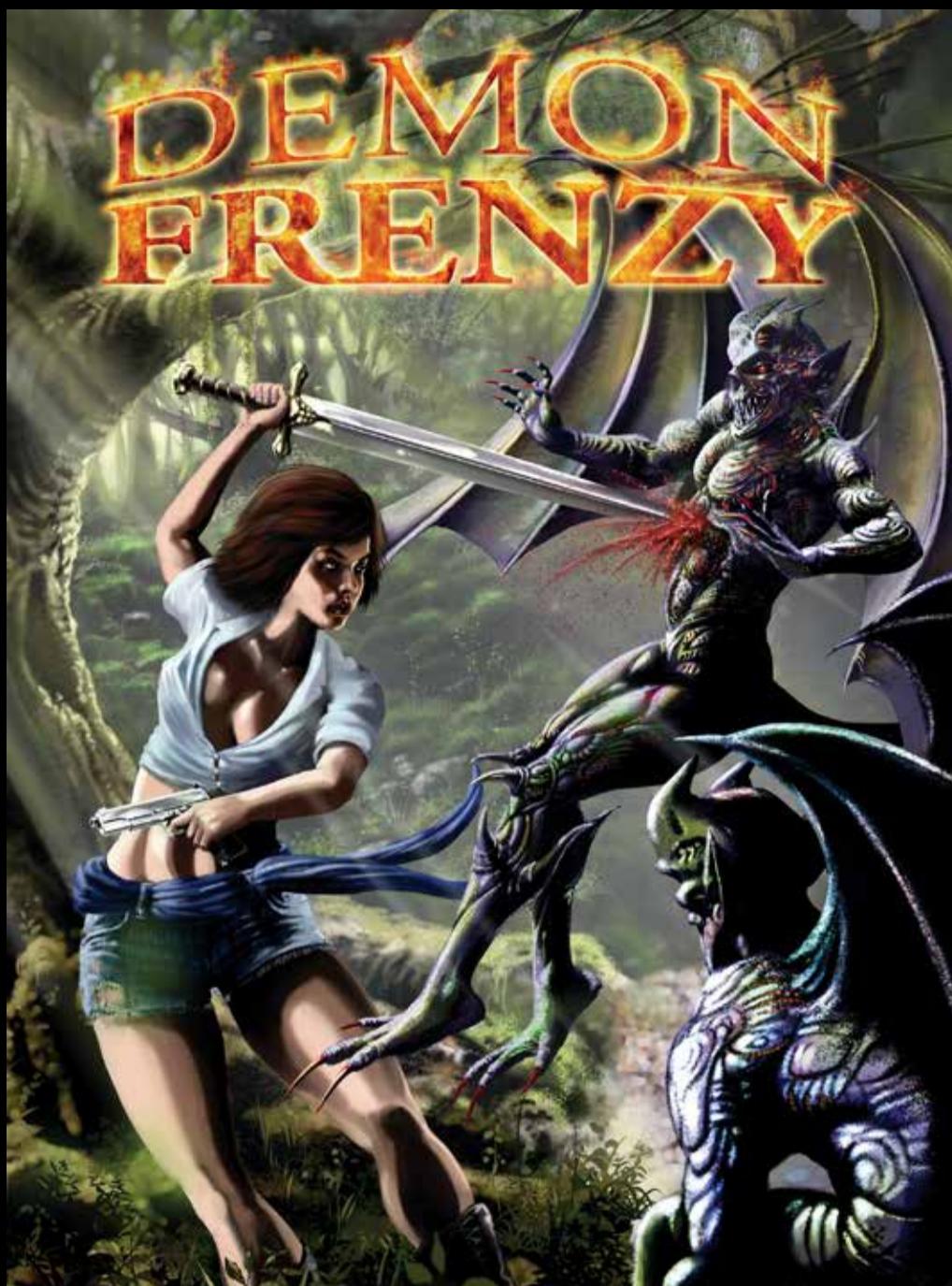


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# The Shadow Man

by Jamie R. Wargo

Physician: Dr. Edgar  
9828-SJE41

#12940

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**CASE #: 12940**



# **THE SHADOW MAN**

**BY JAMIE R. WARGO**

Sully Ferrero came too, face down in a pile of trash, “right where you belong,” he thought to himself. Lately he’d been making his living running drugs for the local mob boss, Franco Morelli. According to Morelli’s collectors, last night’s delivery was a little short, five thousand dollars’ worth of short, the gentlemen had explained while kicking his ribs into his spine. He lifted his aching head and saw the words “YOU HAVE UNTIL MIDNIGHT” written in blood on a piece of paper.

His right hand throbbed and ached. He looked down and saw three severed stumps where his fingers used to be and reality set in. He shot up, ripped the hem of his shirt and hastily tied it around his wrist to slow the bleeding. Trembling he picked up a dirty rag, wrapped his hand, then stumbled out of the ally into the street. He made it three blocks before the rag he’d wrapped his hand in had soaked through and began leaving a blood trail on the sidewalk. His peripheral vision distorted and the buildings bent and waved as he walked along dismal city streets toward his apartment. He passed through crowds of vagrants and junkies that paid him no mind for which he was grateful, the last thing he wanted to do was draw attention. His building was only two blocks away

"Just get there before someone calls the police" he told himself as he maneuvered around an overturned trash bin.

Ten minutes later he reached his door and fumbled, left-handed with the keys until it unlocked. He all but fell into his apartment when the door swung open against his weight, slamming into the wall behind it. He kicked the door shut and flipped the light switch on. The overhead bulb flashed and burned out. Cursing, he crossed the room, arm out, feeling his way to the lamp on the other side.

The sensation that someone had ran up behind him sent him flailing for the light, nearly knocking it off the table. He righted the lamp and fumbled with the knob until light flooded the room. He spun around, shielding his face as if a fatal blow was coming, but there was no one there. Morelli's men had not come to finish the job before his time was up.

A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. Across the room, in the corner, a shadow figure stood staring at him. Its edges shimmered and waved, but it maintained the shape of a man. Sully stared back at it in disbelief. The stumps on his right hand throbbed, but he didn't dare move.

"I'm so cold," its voice rang out.

Sully shook off the chill that ran down his spine.

"What did you say?"

A steady "thump, thump, thump," sound caught Sully's attention. He looked down at the blood dripping from the rag, splattering on the floor. "*I'm hallucinating from blood loss, this isn't real.*" He pulled his right arm to his chest and staggered to the kitchen, leaving the figment of his imagination in the corner.

He opened the refrigerator and pulled a bottle of cheap Scotch from the shelf. Clenching the cap between his teeth he twisted the bottle open, spit the cap on the floor and took a big swig. With his good hand he yanked an ice tray from the freezer and attempted to break the cubes free. When they wouldn't budge he slammed the tray down sending them sprawling across the table. He scooped up the cubes and dumped them into a bowl, then carefully pulled the makeshift bandage from his wounded hand. He cringed at the memory of Morelli's men laughing when the dull, electric knife chopped and sliced its way through his fingers.

"Come on Sully you can do this," he told himself and took a deep breath, then shoved his hand into the ice. Burning pain shot to his elbow and he stifled a scream. His head went light and the room started to spin. He sat down, closed his eyes, and prayed.

After a few minutes the ice had slowed the bleeding and his hand went numb. "*I have to seal the wound.*" In a daze he walked room to room, turning on lights and watching them burn out one at a time.

The hair prickled on the back of his neck and he sensed a constant presence behind him. In the corner of his bedroom he saw his iron and board he'd left that morning. Maniacal laughter burst from him as he pictured what he was about to do.

"What do you think ghost? Do I have the balls to do it?!" He shouted.

He picked up the iron, cradling it under his arm and went back to the kitchen.

Piles of dirty dishes blocked the electrical outlet. With a sweep of his arm he cleared them from the counter. The mess crashed to the floor and dozens of roaches scattered from beneath the broken glass. Minutes later the iron hissed a puff of steam.

He took a gulp of scotch and without hesitation, picked up the steaming iron, flattened what was left of his right hand on the counter, and smashed the hot iron on the stumps. Fiery pain shot through his hand and up his arm. He took a breath and screamed until his lungs were empty. The overwhelming pain and smell of burnt flesh

was too much for him. Still holding the hot iron on his hand, he turned his head and vomited. His knees gave out and the iron crashed into the sink as he slumped to the floor in the mess of broken dishes and roaches.

\*\*\*

Sometime later he woke up to moonlight beaming through the grimy window. He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the time. "8pm, that gives me four hours to come up with five grand or I'm a dead man," he thought. His mouth was dry and the throbbing in his hand was unbearable. He grabbed the edge of the counter and pulled himself up from the floor. Blood, vomit, and bits of burnt skin lay next to the iron in the bottom of the sink. He turned on the water and ducked his head under the faucet.

His right hand pulsated waves of pain with every heartbeat and he raised it to the dim light for a better look. His index finger and thumb were still intact, but the other three were nothing more than one inch long stumps. The iron had cauterized his skin and stopped the bleeding but white puss had already begun seeping from the wounds.

He picked up the bottle of Scotch, took a big gulp, and then dialed Tony's number. Tony was small fries compared to Morelli when it came to mobsters but he was hoping he would lend him the money. After six rings he hung up, he figured Tony had already heard about his situation and wasn't going to get involved.

On his own and facing death he paced the apartment. He still had four hours to come up with something and he wasn't above begging at this point. The next call he made was to Candy, a hooker that he frequented. She had some connections and might be able get him the money.

"This is Candy."

"Candy, it's me, Sully."

The line went dead.

He threw the phone against the wall and plopped down on the couch. Defeated, he swore he would never steal money from the mob again if someone could just get him out of this mess. For a long while he sat on the stained couch, emptying the bottle of scotch to numb the pain radiating through his hand. It was just after eleven when he tipped the bottle the last time, "Fuck," he screamed then smashed the empty bottle against the wall.

The neighbor screamed muffled obscenities at him through the wall.

"Fuck you!" he shouted back at her.

He slumped into the couch, hung his head and wept.

"God, I swear if you get me out of this I promise I'll be a changed man. No more drinking, no more gambling, just please help me."

"God wants nothing to do with you Sully, but I do." A voice rang out.

A breeze ruffled his hair and Sully raised his head "Who said that?" he shouted.

He looked up at the Shadow Man hovering above him on the ceiling. Sully shot to his feet, the sudden movement caused a head rush and he smashed face first into the floor, snapping the cartilage in his nose. The room spun out of control but he was too weak to move. The temperature dropped and the silence became pin pricks of ice on his already cold skin. With one eye barely open, he saw the Shadow Man standing over him.

A strong hand pulled him to his feet and steadied him. He was close enough to feel cold breath on his face but he couldn't make out what the Shadow Man was saying. Sully held his breath and listened closely as

misunderstood whispers filled his head. A warming sensation engulfed his body, soothing away the aches, and then a sudden, intense heat ran through his veins and dropped him to his knees. A choked cry forced itself up from his throat as tears, blood, and sweat ran down his face. He gasped for air but there was only heat. Panic induced sweat dripped from every pore and his eyes began to burn. There was a shift within him, a tugging sensation that pulled on his insides. The heat that was ravaging him disappeared, replaced by a deep coldness like the winter wind had settled within him. His heart, seconds ago pounded in his chest had fallen silent. Finally free from the Shadow Man's grip, Sully crawled to the bathroom.

Shivering, he flipped the light switch and the explosion of light blinded him. He covered his eyes and dropped to the floor. After a few breathless moments the pain in his head subsided. Keeping his eyes covered he reached up, turned the light off, and pulled himself up to the mirror. A faceless shadow stared back at him. He waved his hand and it mimicked the motion.

A floor board creaked outside the bathroom door and he turned in time to see his body pass by. In disbelief Sully watched it walk to the front door.

"Hey, Stop!" He yelled, his voice was cracked and ragged.

It stopped and spun toward him. His once blue eyes were now void of color and his face held an inhumanly large grin. Horrified, Sully stepped back into the bathroom. The entity that had stolen his body had distorted his features into an unrecognizable monster.

"Stay out of the light," it said, and stepped into the hallway.

He tried to give chase but the light forced him back into the apartment. He slammed the door and listened to heavy footsteps as his body strolled down the hall, whistling, without him in it.

Sully ran to the front window; a black Cadillac sat idling in the street below. The clock on the wall chimed twelve times and he laughed as Morelli's men dragged his body into the ally. A shadow figure scurried out, crawling on four legs that twisted and bent as the creature defied gravity and clung to the side of the building.

Moments later a gunshot rang out. The creature looked up at Sully and hissed, then disappeared into the shadows.

*"It was never a man,"* He thought to himself.

The car drove away and Sully sunk into the shadows shivering, waiting. Soon there would be someone coming to clean out the apartment and he would walk in the warm light again.

The End

**CASE #12940**

**THE SHADOW MAN**

**BY JAMIE R. WARGO**



Jamie Wargo is an avid reader and aspiring author. She has a full time career as well as a full time job as mom to a very energetic boy. Born and raised in north east Ohio she currently resides there with her husband and son. She is the youngest of eight children and is currently working on a science fiction novella.

You can find her on twitter: Jamie @ladywargo



# The Coffin and the Crib

by Joshua Hibbard

Physician: Dr. Roundtree  
8245-AVD12

#37339

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CASE #: 37339



# THE COFFIN AND THE CRIB

BY JOSHUA HIBBARD

The first spider found me while I slept.

The iron hand clanged into midnight, and my eyes flew open at the sound of its brass voice. *It was there—before me, directly above my head, exactly where my waking eyes would fall.* How long had it been waiting above me in the darkness? How long had it hung from its silken rope, awaiting the glorification of my pupils? *Was it watching me sleep? Was it waiting for me to awaken?*

A chill deeper than mere cold tingled my flesh. It tickled me from head to toe like a rush of ants crawling up my skin with tiny, prickly legs, and large, prickly pincers.

The spider was motionless, and seemed to float in midair, so fine was its strand. And so close was the spider, that I could see its bulbous, glass eyes. I could almost see *myself* reflected in those luminous black gems. Another inch or two, and it would touch my nose. If I tried to get up, I would have to brush flesh with my eight-legged sentinel. The thought of those spindly, twitching legs creeping up my face was too much. I laid still. I dared not breathe. I watched my guardian demon. And it watched me.

The night continued to sing its song, and the brass grandfather would add his voice to its silence every so often. The smaller, happier chimes comingling with the creaks and gasps of the shifting, aging house. Sometimes they sounded like small bits of silver tinkling to the ground, like pieces of sand in an hourglass falling away one at a time.

And through it all I moved not an inch—and neither did the spider. We were letting time ice our bones into stone. We were frozen in each other's gaze, an iron bar tethering its eyes to mine. Strange, incandescent swirls painted its abdomen—they seemed to form an eerie eye—a *human* eye, with the lid sliced off.

After a while, I could no longer feel my limbs. I wasn't sure if they were simply numb from the soaking cold, or if I had perhaps abandoned them long ago in my desperate vigil. Brooding fear, lurking horror had robbed them of purpose and courage. They retreated inwards, and took with them my heaving heart. My own heart was sinking into my chest, burrowing into the dark cavity carved by quiet dread.

But suddenly the dawn shook the sleep from its golden head, and the night recoiled in disgust. Shadows sunk into the corners and crevices of the room, oozing into the darker places that would hold them while they waited. A pale ray of white light pierced through my curtains and alighted, as if by a miracle, upon the hanging horror itself.

The spider writhed and spasmed and twitched in the light, until at last it frantically scrambled up the invisible thread, scurried across the ceiling, and was gone. I gasped in relief, finally allowing myself to breathe once more. And yet I'm certain that, even as it retreated, there was a look in its eyes: a gleaming, loathing look.

And that look haunted me the entire day. I could think of nothing else, except those glassy, black orbs and their look that whispered *tonight, tonight*.

I did not want the day to end! I wished death for the night, and immortality for the day! Even if it meant I should never again lie under the stars or gaze up at the moon. For I knew that once the sun went to bed the things that crawled at night would wake.

But perhaps I was being foolish—I told myself to stop being silly. There was nothing to worry about—it was a simple spider! A *single* spider! One damned, small, insignificant arachnid that would perish naturally in several weeks time anyway. There was nothing to worry about. So what if the night came? Let it? And so what if the spider came with the night? Let it!

Let it.

And the night did come.

And the spider with it.

The second the midnight hand began its song, my eyes flew open. I tried to shut them, I tried to go back to sleep, I tried to forget all about it (*for maybe then it would go away, or wouldn't harm me*), but it was no use. Just as before, the moment I opened them, my eyes alighted instantly upon the slowly descending monster.

The vermin slid down its silver thread with the ease and grace of a settling leaf. Those horrible, tiny legs like black needles knitting a gossamer rope.

I trembled, I shivered, I spasmed violently—my breath choked my throat, my heart beat against its prison! No, no, no! Why would it not leave me? Why was it here? What did it want? I thought about jumping up and running away—I thought about moving—I thought screaming and clawing out my eyes—but by then it was too late. The thoughts had only just formed from the fear-inflamed brew of my chaotic mind when the spider halted—a mere hair's length away from eye.

And my breathing ceased, and probably my heart as well. Every muscle in my body clenched tight as a statue. My grinding teeth echoed inside my skull.

I knew if I even blinked, my eyelashes would brush against those hairy legs, would touch that bloated abdomen. The eye—that terrible eye on the belly—it was watching me. Nine eyes fixed upon my one, and I could have sworn I saw the reflection of my own eye in its!

I kept myself perfectly still, breathing in spider breaths, peering into those fathomless little jewels. But agony began to seep into my skin and bones. Like a thin liquid, pain started to drizzle through my veins, a deep, throbbing ache as terrible as exposed bone and raw sinew. A pain like millions of tiny embers burning underneath my tissue.

And the spider just waited, and watched. The eyes filled with gloating. Each hammer of my weak heart, each drop of salty sweat, each agonized, stifled breath—a feast. My feast of suffering its feast of pleasure—my every ounce of misery a morsel for its gluttony.

I heard no nighttime crickets, no birds or wind or rustling trees; I heard no creaks or groans or silver chimes or iron bells. To me the darkness was infinite, the silence adamantine, and time seemed to have abandoned me for better places.

When at last the dawn broke, and the spider once more retreated to its lair, I still could not move. I was petrified by my own withered muscles and will. Only tears had the life left to flow.

That day passed in abject terror. I knew exactly what the next night would bring, and I knew I could not survive another encounter. And so, I spent all of my precious sunlight planning and searching. I searched the house from top to bottom to find my twilight torturer. But the house was too vast, and my time too little, and near the end I had to content myself by choosing a different room. Yet I chose such that it was nearly void of entrances and holes, and I slept with a candle beside my bed...

The iron hand moved slower than ever. I waited and waited for it to begin its melody, but the seconds themselves seemed to be made of iron! I was frantic, desperate, feverish—a plan forming in my head, and with it, impatience, and trepidation. What if I should fail? What if it should find me? What if it doesn't work?

Thoughts and fears boiled in my brain until my head blistered like a burning cauldron. I felt I should go mad unless that iron bird would sing!

I had but a second left of sanity when at last the brazen throat burst. Each booming note resounded through the house loud as a giant's hammer, and each note was a symphony to my ears.

From my new bed I peered across the room, across the walls and ceiling, across the floors and doors, my eyes swiveling white and wide as a vulture's. The combination of fear and darkness had ironically heightened my senses, and I felt that all the crepuscular world was laid bare before me! Not a mite of dust could hide in a shadowy crack across the room without my spotting it!

And there was a delicious moment when I was certain that the room was bereft of life, save for myself. Laughing merrily at my fruitful scheme, I pulled up my blankets and turned over in my bed to...

The spider was crawling across my pillow—there was a triumphant mockery to its deliberate motion. A look in its eyes that dissolved my sanity and bore my thoughts halfway to Hell. I felt a scream gurgling up my throat; I don't remember thinking or pausing. All I remember was a feeling as of cold water being poured down my back. The goosebumps erupted like tiny bones trying to puncture my skin from the inside. Something in my skull was slipping, slipping away to memories of a young girl still caught in the sunshine of childhood. All that I

saw was that horrible, horrible thing.

I leapt from the bed. The spider did not move. I screamed. The creature only stared. I seized the candle from the ground. Still, the spider stood menacingly still. With a vicious snarl as of nothing human, I stabbed the wax and orange flame onto the little beast! I cackled and cajoled and laughed and snickered as the little thing twitched and curled, and I continued to giggle and chortle as the entire pillow burst into flames. And imagine my amusement when I saw the flames ignite the creature's silken thread, and run up to the ceiling like a string of fire!

And even as I watched the molten yellow spread across the room like liquid gold, all I could think of was how violently the spider had jerked and crumpled into a black stain. Oh how joyous, how exuberant, how blissful that sight made me!

That fire devoured half of my home. Yet I did not care, for I had destroyed—nay, eradicated—my tormentor! It was a victory well worth the price, and one I would cheerily pay again had I a thousand homes twice as large and a fire hot as Lucifer's bath! I would skin myself alive and offer it as food to the flames in return for freedom from my tormentor!

I can scarcely remember ever sleeping so well after having committed such a salacious murder. Yes—murder I call it now, for could anything with such a will, anything with such malevolence and evil be considered as part of the mere kingdom of insects? No! It was not a spider that I had killed, but an evil being—and of that I was certain.

An entire week of paradisiacal dreams soothed my tortured mind in sleep, and during the day I listened to the sounds of nature more intently than I had ever done so in my entire life: I cherished each whistle of the birds, I sighed at every rustle of wind, I laughed at every buzzing bee, I gloried in every patter of rain—joys and sights and smells and sounds that only the agony of terror could awaken in me! My baptism by fear had rebirthed me with a soul infinitely sensitive to the beauty and subtleties of this world.

One night, several days later, I remember resting on my couch near the open back doors; the smell of evening and of summer absorbed me, and I quickly fell into a deep sleep in the embrace of the warm air. My dreams were filled with fairytales, and my body was filled with peace. There were clouds and feathers rolling past me in great purple waves. Their satin smoothness caressed my skin, and the falling feathers tickled my nose and mouth.

And when my eyes flew open, for suddenly I could not breathe, I saw that the tickling was due to a black spider spinning a white web over my mouth. My insides turned to water. With a crash, the dream dissolved in bleeding maroon currents, like a room of wax suddenly lit by a bonfire. I was in my home. I was on my couch.

It was the dead of night. And all around me patches of shadows were twitching. I saw several near my arms and legs, upon the couch and on the floor, on the ceiling and on the walls—there were dozens of them. They shifted and moved fitfully, almost as if they were the shadows caused by some unseen fire. The ones closest to me looked like massive clumps of thick black hair.

I went to move my arm to smash the spider dancing on my lips, but found that I could not. My eyes turned to my arm and—I choked, I gasped, I could feel the sticky webs on my lips—and I saw a thick layer of fine white strands completely covering my arms like ropes. It, it was like being mummified alive!

I panicked—a cold sweat formed on my brow—I could barely breathe—I tried to open my mouth, but the webs held them shut! They ran down along my cheek, sticking to my skin, and wrapped down to my neck. Layer upon layer, thousands of tiny, white chords. I started to tremble violently. The pit of my stomach soured.

The spider spinning webs on my lips paused, feeling me tremble. It swiveled on me, and stared at me with

its tiny eyes. Then it crawled up my lips, paused beneath my nose—and waited. Waited for me to move.

My muscles flared with madness, my vision bled with hatred and fear, I tensed all my body to jump up and run away—

But even as I tensed, every single hairy clump shuddered, and even as they burst apart into hordes of crawling eight-legged horrors, I knew that they were not clumps of hair, but clusters of spiders.

A hundred thousand vermin descended upon me. A thousand dark creepers plummeted from the ceiling on a curtain of silk. A thousand-thousand lurched across the couch and crept towards my exposed skin. The floor was carpeted with a million vermin, all with bulbous abdomens and hairy, spindly legs, and it seemed the whole floor was a boiling cauldron of tar. They appeared in every corner, skittered across every open surface, jerked through the air like fantastically insane black butterflies; and every single one was coming for me. I could feel the weight and horror of a million million glassy eyes intent upon me, reflecting and redoubling my fear until my mind creaked and twisted near to a snap.

And my body disobeyed me. No matter how hard I thought, no matter how much effort I used, no matter the force of my will, I could not get a muscle to budge! The webs—the webs! Was it they? Were they holding me prisoner? Surely not—not me, so large and powerful a creature, surely not!

Those thoughts had scarce escaped my maddening mind when I saw the answer. For, on the exposed parts of my bare flesh were scattered very small red and white blobs—places my skin had become swollen and enflamed—sores, bites—there must have been hundreds of them, covering every inch, some so clustered they were bulging and swelling together into small, horrid mountains of pulsating, feverish flesh, capped with red pocks festering to putrescent green.

The twitching devils had feasted upon me. They had bit and pierced my skin with their hundreds of fangs. They had bathed me in a shower of venomous drops, like a storm of poisonous rain. I could not feel that vile river oozing beneath my skin, but I knew it was there. My limbs, my fingers, my chest, my neck, even my face, were all as numb and cold as a corpse. My heart beat like a starving drum.

As my eyes adjusted to that pitiless darkness, I could see that my entire body was dressed in webs. The spiders were spinning strands around my legs, around my arm, around my chest. I watched each thin thread fall upon my skin and clothing like one piece of white yarn. And now with an army of spinners draping threads across my body, in mere minutes they had woven a tapestry of sticky cobwebs about my entirely.

They crawled across my chest a hundred strong, and immediately another hundred followed. They spun me a silken glove, interlaced between each finger, and then they knitted me a collar of lace, and then a snowy gown. I could only just feel the faint prickle of their pointed claws—yes! Each seemed a miniature black hand fingering my skin, walking like something possessing me—like my body was no longer mine, but theirs!

And even as this hideous realization crept through my mind, I became cognizant of strange—nay, how mad—the entire nightmare was! If I could've opened my mouth I should have laughed! The giggles grew and died identically in my throat—my whole chest shivered with their frenetic energy. How insane it was—how ludicrous—how impossible! And how infinitely more hysterical it was that I thought it was real! *Not my body, but theirs.*

It was all just an absurd dream—a ridiculous fantasy brought on by sleepless nights and unnerving terror. Ha! The spiders may own and steal me in my dreams, but I would win once I waked! And when my dreams were withered, I would be the master, and I would settle this grisly nighttime affair—I would torch the house! I would

grind the stone foundations to dust! I would boil the ashes to vapor! I would sing and dance upon the desolation of my home, my victory. And until then, I would play along with these little monstrosities.

Ha ha, yes so clever! These tiny demons were so cunning—but not enough to see through my ruse. I would play with their game, I would be their helpless victim—ha, ha!

They were clever—oh so clever—they wanted me to scream and foam and rage, but I did not—I would not! For after finishing my cobweb garb, as fine as gossamer, they began linking together long bits of web and attaching these ropes to me. How many spiders rattled and blazed around the room was impossible to tell, for it was churning in thick shadows innumerable. Then the spiders, by what strength and power I could not guess, by machinations wholly supernatural, they started to pull me off the couch.

With every silken thread acting as a tether, they crawled and heaped atop one another in a mad effort to pull my weight. Thousands of ties snapped, and thousands more replaced each one. Every collapsed spider was overtaken by another hundred. Thousands and thousands joined the fantastic quest to pull me along in my pearly cocoon. They tumbled and fell, but always rejoined the fray.

And I...I could feel myself moving, ever so slightly, ever so slowly. But they were doing it. It was working.

How much more outrageous could such a dream become? Was there no limit to the absurdities my mind could conjure? Spiders carrying away a human wrapped in webs? Ha! To where? For what purpose?

...to where?

Here at last they wrenched me free from the couch. That sickening sense of falling rushed through me, but I barely felt the hard wood floor coming upwards to meet me. And not a single spider was beneath me as I tumbled over the edge—they had scattered in half a wink.

Once more they resumed their laborious task of hauling me away by thousands of single strands. Each individually was not much stronger than single hair I thought, and yet together they were a rope thicker and stronger than steel.

Once more I started moving. They were dragging me towards the door, towards the balcony—outside. To where? To where?

Onto the course balcony I slunk, making no more noise than the padding of a mouse. Soon I was outside. It was utterly dark. The moon had abandoned me in my dreams, and left the earth a yawning, black abyss.

Where were they taking me? Where?

And I nearly laughed again, thinking that they had no means of getting me down the stairs...when out of the corner of my eye I saw a massive streak of glistening white where my steps had been. It glimmered even in the absence of starlight.

The beasts had constructed a small silken chute to carry me down the steps! Incredible! Ha, ha! Their insidious ways knew no bounds!

Down that shaft they guided me; I slipped down it as easily and smoothly as rain down a gutter. Wet grass greeted my cold body, and barely budding dew drops clung to me with desperation. Almost as if they were afraid; almost as if they were warning me and trying to pull me away from my captors—to save me from what horror awaiting I knew not!

But no, no—I was cleverer than they! I knew their ploy, I knew my mind, I knew my dreams! It wasn't real, it couldn't be. No, no! I would awaken soon enough, soon enough. It wouldn't be much longer. The nightmare was at an end—yes, I was sure of it!

Away they took me! Sliding over slick grass and smashing still-born daisies—past the edge of the meadow and into the forest that slept on the edge of my home. How many there were! I could not see the ground in front of me for the writhing mass that swept and pulled me by the silvery threads. The whole yard was alive and wriggling, as if every single blade of grass had given birth to an entire brood of spiderlings. Even in the absence of light I could swear that I could see their eyes glinting and sparkling, as if the stars had fallen to the earth and were being spirited away by the vermin themselves!

Just as they spirited me away, past tree and bush, deep and dark into the brooding woodland. They swept twigs and leaves aside for my ghostly procession. They concocted hollows and sheets of cobwebs to help facilitate my journey. And all without making a sound louder than a whisper. Anything alive in that forest, any fox or owl, would've thought it only a brief rustle of leaves from a gust of wind. They could never have dreamt the kidnapping occurring, nor the cargo, nor the sheer number of creatures that ruled by night and lay hidden by day.

It was marvelous—absolutely marvelous! Had my hands been free I would have clapped loudly for them! It was the swiftest and quietest kidnapping that had ever occurred by mortal things—and not done by man at that! No these spiders had far more guile and cunning than any loping human. Every delusional human who walked the earth thought their species master of the world—both night and day—but they had never seen *the night crawl!* No! They had never watched the shadows grow legs and scramble about, free from any flame. They had never seen the Dark God creep from its cobbed lair to rule.

Such a dream I was having—such a dream as no mortals dared have! But I dared, I would see this to the end; and then what fires, what flames, what *infernos* I would erect in homage to this magnificent fantasy! All the waking world would see the vestiges of my nightmare.

I suddenly became aware that my feet were dropping downwards. Yes—I was descending gently down a slope. Just as the last of the stars disappeared above my head, I knew that I was heading down into the jaws of a tunnel.

The smell of damp and rotten earth was redolent. But far more potent was the quality of the air itself: stagnant and musty. Like air that had never been breathed by living things—that had never seen a sparkle of sunlight. Like air that had been born in dismal world before light, and fed only by age and the collecting filth of the dead. This air had fed upon corpses, upon the mountain of human bones that slumbers beneath the surface!

Sludge and smut smeared against my hair and neck, clammy and vile. My body made a squelching noise as it was carried into the bowels of the earth, through the collected filth and bile of the spiders. The mud and refuse stuck to my webs. But the worst came the deeper we went. With my own weight now dragging me down, the walls of the tunnel became smaller and smaller, until I could feel them pressing against me on all sides. My chest was constricted, and my nose was dragging against the muck of the ceiling. My arms were pinned to my sides... and still the hole shrunk.

Such vile air combined with a collapsing tomb made me short of breath. By this point I was heaving, frantically trying to fill my lungs with anything—anything but the squirming slime and silken webs that oozed down my face and across my mouth! Liquid drizzled down my forehead and into my eyes—slimy webs clung to me from every side—the sound of my body plunging towards its squirming, writhing grave the only sound.

I felt like—like, like a worm! Yes that's it! My dream of worms now, the worms of childhood and sunshine, when they'd been wriggly things to eat and play with in the mud—and now I was one of them! How I burrowed

through the earth like one of them. It was as if the ground was swallowing me whole, and I was now slinking down its throat like a morsel of precious food, worm food! Worm food! What a feast I would make!

At last, just before my lungs burst and my body was squeezed into mush, I felt my feet lose the ground; and then I was falling. A cavernous chamber engulfed me, and when I hit the bottom, it was soft and springy. I barely felt a thing.

But I felt the blood rushing from my toes and pooling behind my eyes, and I knew that I was hanging head first. The pressure mounted, my blood threatening to burst through my eyes and out my nose and mouth—a dull throb set in.

All was quiet. There was not a hint of a chill in the chamber. It was warm and wet.

My eyes adjusted. As if blessed with night vision by some cruel god's joke, the cavern began to appear around me.

I was in the nest. I knew it immediately! The sprawling webs beaded with small white globules, the reek and miasma of birthing slimes and splintered egg sacs. But...but where were the spiders?

My nightmares had planted a lonely hell for me, and made me its gardener. I could not understand. Was this to be the last torture? Did the foolish dream end here? Could I at last awaken and seek my vengeance?

But I felt them.

I felt them crawling over me once more. Crawling down my legs and onto my stomach. I turned my eyes up. I could see them. There they were. Hundreds of white spiders, fatter than the rest, but...

No—no, they weren't just spiders. They were spiders carrying something. Small white blobs upon their back that undulated. Each spider carried one, almost larger than itself. And as they came closer. I knew. I KNEW.

They were eggs. And even from this distance, and in this light, I could see them bulging hideously, engorged upon rich webs and fat spiderlings.

They approached my head. One reached my chin, and then paused. My eyes grew wide. My heart nearly stop. What were they doing? What? WHAT! My eyes screamed at the spider. And its own...they only glowed.

It crept up my jaw, tickling so slightly, and then stopped at my cheek. I could only just see it near the bottom-most rim of my eye. I could only just see it sink its fangs into my delicate skin. I felt nothing still. I watched and watched as it bit away minuscule mouthfuls of my spongy flesh, and with each bite it opened a crater in my skin. Blood welled around the wound and slowly dribbled out. But the spider did not notice. It just ate and bit and ate some more, carving a pit into my very cheek.

The blood on my face began to dry before it was done. But for an unfathomable amount of time I just watched the spider eat me alive. And when a sizable hole had been dug, the vermin turned around and pointed its abdomen at the hole. Then with carefully writhing legs, it spun a neat string of silk, and embedded it into my skin. Once it was covered with the white gloss, now staining red, it very slowly, very deliberately, planted the egg sac into my cheek.

I screamed. I screamed but nothing came from my throat. I screamed so loud and silently I thought my vocal chords would burst. I screamed so long it turned into a hideous laugh. *It's a dream, it's only a dream, it's must be a dream—*

*God let it be a dream!*

And then they all—the rest of the spiders—found places in my flesh to nestle their brood. Many carved out chunks of my arms and thighs. Others went for my breasts and sides; and then many more marched directly to

my face, and began clustering their eggs around the first hole already carved.

I had become the vessel to birth their wretched spawn. The crib of the decadent.

Holes and holes they sliced from my skin. Nests they sculpted from my flesh. Each chewing away a bit of me, each devouring me piece by piece. Soon I was riddled with holes. Soon my face looked like nothing human, but more like the outside of a red sea sponge, or perhaps swiss cheese—a caverned, clustered, porous husk. Aha! And they spun their silk, and they laid their eggs into my shell, and then they trickled away.

And they left me alone.

Alone, but for the eggs in my mouth, in my eye, in my arms, in my thighs—and they were *throbbing, throbbing!* *I could feel the beat of their hearts.* In my cheek, they pulsed like glowing embers ready to ignite. The bloated eggs grew swollen and veined, and then shrank once again—my cheek swelled and shrank with them. They were growing in my mouth, *feeding off my blood*, absorbing it through their translucent skins. It felt as if my own body were throbbing with the fever of a disease!

I felt the first rupture. There was a tiny *crack*, and then a liquid oozed down my temple and into my ear. Spindly legs finer than needles skittered up onto my nose.

A creamy-red spider looked down on me.

Nine eyes stared into my one. Eight bulbous, shiny jewels, and one larger, lidless pupil upon its abdomen that looked eerily human.

And I knew it was not a dream.

The End.

**CASE #37339**

**THE COFFIN AND THE CRIB**

**BY JOSHUA HIBBARD**



J. John Hibbard spends his days studying physics and classics, watching old Gothic horror movies, playing with his pet rat Sebastian, reading Poe and Lovecraft, and writing out every bone in the skeletal closet of his mind.



Part lawman, part tracker and part magician, the Wardens are monster-hunters - tasked with protecting the people from the various, nightmarish creatures that have invaded the world of men.

Despite his personal dislike for the job, Errol Magnus has faithfully carried out the daunting (and singularly dangerous) duties of Warden for their region in place of his missing brother Tom. Truth be told, despite his reluctance in accepting the role, there is no one better suited for it in terms of knowledge, training and skill.

Arriving home after an extended sojourn in the Badlands, where monsters are as common as blades of grass, Errol longs for just a single day to pass that doesn't require him to put his life in danger. His desire for a respite, however, is complicated by two things: the arrival of a mysterious troupe of performers - and the appearance of a bloodthirsty creature that kills its victims in a horribly gruesome fashion.

Now Errol must determine what connection - if any - exists between the troupe and the killings, as well as find a way to stop the monster before the body count goes any higher.

Available at  
**amazon**



“ As midnight falls, all manner of terror invades the Earth”

REVIEW BY HEAVEN OF HORROR

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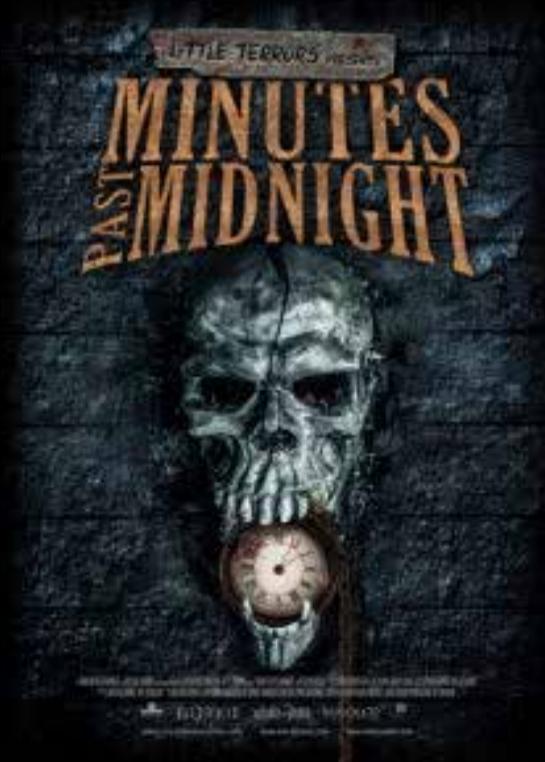
## MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT

Any anthology will be a mixed bag, but Minutes Past Midnight has an overwhelming amount of very good [horror short films](#) as its segments.

Basically, Minutes Past Midnight is simply a collection of horror short films. And good horror short films at that. With any anthology – horror or otherwise – you’re bound to get the good with the bad. And yes, Minutes past Midnight does feature a few segments that didn’t rock my world. However, I didn’t really think any of them were bad. That in itself is a huge win!

Also, this horror anthology featured a wide array of horror styles. We get the very simple and creepy stories without any real use of effects. Then there’s the stop motion puppet horror short film, which was beautiful and pretty amazing – but more suited to children, in my opinion. Even if it was pretty creepy. And then there’s a completely batshit crazy little gem of a horror short film called Roid Rage.

I don’t know what I expected from that particular segment, but certainly not that. I went from thinking “Okay, this is just shitty acting” to allowing myself to surrender to it completely. Mini-spoiler: It wasn’t actually bad acting, it was just a super campy



“If you love horror, then you’ll love this horror anthology”

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exploitation style short film. It crossed the line for my funny bone a few times, but never too much. A feature length movie would be way to much for me, though. But this was pretty perfect.

Oh, but don't think that it was my favorite. It absolutely wasn't, but I love the fact that it can work as part of this Minutes Past Midnight anthology. The truth is, I loved several of the segments, so I can't really choose a favorite. And that doesn't happen too often!

#### The Nine Short Films of Minutes Past Midnight

The segments – or short films – of this horror anthology are so extremely varied that it's impossible to find a favorite. Depending on your mood, you might love one more than another. While we've given the Minutes Past Midnight anthology one rating as a whole, we'll give a rating to each segment as well here:

##### Never Tear Us Apart - 4/5

Short and sweet... or, you know, bloody and creepy!

##### Awake - 3/5

Very dark and sad, but didn't quite hit the mark for me

##### Crazy For You - 5/5

This was actually sweet, but also very funny, quirky and pure murder. Left me in that sweet spot where I want more, but really don't need it.

##### The Mill At Calder's End - 3/5

We all know from The Nightmare Before Christmas that animation work really well with campy horror. This one was more of a soft horror story for kids, but with some truly scary elements and truly beautiful craftsmanship. The horror part just didn't win me over.

##### Roid Rage - 4/5

Umm, yeah, I mentioned this above. Sick, twisted and absolutely amazing. Also, very unforgettable, though I kinda wish it wasn't!

##### Feeder - 5/5

This has everything I want from a good short film and a good horror story. Absolutely spot on. Awesome story and perfect execution.

Timothy – 3/5

Definitely has scary elements, but didn't work as well for me as I thought it would. Donnie Darko on crack, but not in a good way.

Ghost Train – 4/5

This was almost as sad as it was scary, but it definitely was a damn good horror story.

Horrific – 4/5

A great focus on dark comedy in this horror short, and that always works for me. Sometimes it's the simple stuff that works the best.

If you love horror, then you'll love this horror anthology

Really, there is something for everyone on this horror anthology. Well, everyone who loves horror movies anyway. Minutes Past Midnight is one of the most consistently good anthologies while also serving up segments of very different styles and subgenres.

Minutes Past Midnight has been out in limited theatrical release, and is available on VOD from October 18, 2016. Also, it'll be out on DVD from February 7, 2017.

Details:

Director: Robert Boocheck, Lee Cronin, Francisco Sonic Kim, Ryan Lightbourn, Marc Martínez Jordán, Kevin McTurk, James Moran, Christian Rivers, Sid Zanforlin

Writer: Chris Bavota, Robert Boocheck, Lee Cronin, Collin George, Ryan Lightbourn, Marc Martínez Jordán, Guy McDouall, James Moran, Ryan Murphy, Sid Zanforlin

Cast: Arthur Darvill, Mika Boorem, Steve Wall, Jason Flemyng, Babara Steele, Owen McDonnell

Plot:

As midnight falls, all manner of terror invades the Earth. Demons, cannibals, killers, ghosts and monsters swarm the world in these tales of the supernatural, the fantastic, and the just plain horrific. Featuring nine stories of horror.

Rating 4/5



## ScreamQueen

Sometimes a chosen name seems to stick, but it's no secret that my real name is Karina Adelgaard. I write reviews and recaps on HeavenofHorror.com and yes, it does happen that I find myself screaming, when watching a good horror movie. I love psychological horror, survival horror and kick-ass women. Also, I have a huge soft spot for a good horror-comedy. Oh yeah, and I absolutely HATE when animals are harmed in movies, so I will immediately think less of any movie, where animals are harmed for entertainment (even if the animals are just really good actors). Fortunately, horror doesn't use this nearly as much as comedy. And people assume horror lovers are the messed up ones. Go figure!

## HorrorDiva

My real name is Nadja Houmøller, but the name HorrorDiva just seems to work for me. I usually keep up-to-date with all the horror news, and make sure Heaven of Horror share the best and latest trailers for upcoming horror movies. I love all kinds of horror.

My love affair started when I watched 'Poltergeist' alone around the age of 10. I slept like a baby that night and I haven't stopped watching horror movies since. The crazy slasher stuff isn't really for me, but hey, to each their own. I guess I just like to be scared and get jump scares, more than being disgusted and laughing at the grotesque. Also, Korean and Spanish horror movies made within the past 10-15 years are among my absolute favorites.



For more news and reviews, head over to [Heaven of Horror.com](http://Heaven of Horror.com)



A Death by any Other  
Name

by Larry Hinkle

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#72028

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CASE #: 72028



# A DEATH BY ANY OTHER NAME

BY LARRY HINKLE

Death sloppily slurped the filling from the last donut of a baker's dozen he'd pilfered on his previous stop (Lucky 13 was filled with blackberry jam, his favorite), wiped the powdered sugar from the cuff of his robe, and pulled out his list. Just one last pickup to make, and he could finally call it a century. Not a decade too soon, either. He smelled like something a dog would take great joy rolling around in, his bones ached down to the, well, bone, and he felt like he was catching cold from his last three slogs through the space between the stars.

He read the last name on his list: *Erik Vaughn, 51. Writer. Omaha.*

A writer. Great. Just the way he wanted to end his shift. Writers could be such pretentious twits. Always wanted to argue about how it couldn't possibly be their time yet. If he'd just give them a few more years, they could finally finish the World's Next Great Novel. Their work was Too Important to be stopped by something so commonplace as dying. Well, his work was important too. It wasn't his fault that barely anyone remembered his name anymore. And besides, it's not like he had any say in the matter. Theirs just happened to be the next name

on his list, which, through no fault of his own, wasn't nearly as long as it used to be. He blamed the Web. Nobody put pen to paper anymore. They just sent emails and texts filled with acronyms and emojis, which were just cartoonish hieroglyphics in his eyes (or at least what passed for eyes on a face like his). And forget about actually printing something. Everything was stored in the cloud now, so it was available onscreen anytime, anywhere. Well la-di-da. He lived in a cloud. It wasn't all that.

Death rolled up his list, threw the donut box away, imagined himself blinking (which was all he could do, since technically one needed eyelids to blink), and shifted his essence to Omaha.

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Erik held his finger under the tap, letting the cold water numb the cut.

His laptop had crapped out last month and he didn't have the money to get it fixed. Since then, he'd been forced to write the last four chapters of his novel longhand, like some sort of savage. Despite his rusty penmanship, he'd been making decent progress until he couldn't remember if his character had ordered the bank customers to freeze or get down on the ground first. He was flipping back through the pages of his notebook when he felt his fingertip slice open. A ribbon of blood welled up through the slit and dripped onto his manuscript. "Dangit, not again," he said as he ran to the sink. This had to be the seventh or eighth paper cut since his laptop died.

He held his finger under the cold water. Once his finger stopped bleeding, he dried it off and wrapped a bandage around it. Satisfied, he walked back to his office.

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Death materialized on Erik's front porch. According to the hourglass, he was right on time. "*Or should I say, write on time?*" he said to himself. It was an old joke, but it still gave him a chuckle. Just a few more minutes, and he could finally clock out. He tucked the hourglass away and stepped through the wall.

Erik's office was a mess. Every inch of every shelf was filled with books. Piles of papers were stacked haphazardly on the floor. A pyramid of magazines and newspapers, highlighted with a rainbow of post-it notes, sat too close to the edge of his desk. Coffee cups and fast food containers were scattered about. Death felt bad for the poor soul who'd have to clean this place when he left.

He tapped the handle of his scythe on the office floor and began. "*Erik Vaughn, your name is on my list,*" he said. "*You must come with me.*"

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Erik wasn't sure which he noticed first: the sudden temperature drop, or the stench. It reminded him of the time his dog Koko had rolled around in a great big gob of greasy grimy gopher guts. (It was really a dead sewer rat, but he'd hummed the song while bathing Koko to keep from throwing up.) A second later the floor shook, and he heard a voice that somehow *wasn't* a voice say his name.

He looked up from his desk and saw a man dressed as the Grim Reaper standing in his office. At least he assumed it was a man. It was hard to be certain since it didn't have skin.

"Who are you?" he asked. "And how the hell did you get in my house?"

"I am Death," the intruder said. "A Reaper of men's souls."

"A Reaper? You mean there's more than one of you? How does that work?"

"Actually, it works—"

"And why just men's souls? What kind of archaic system is that?"

"It's just a phrase, it doesn't—"

Erik held up his hand. "Doesn't what? Mean anything? Then why did you say it? Patriarchal much?"

He pulled a copy of *Ms.* magazine from the pyramid and tossed it at the Reaper. "Here, read this. Maybe you'll learn something. And leave me alone. I've got work to do." He turned his back on Death and picked up his pen.

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"I have work to do, too," Death said. He twirled his scythe and scattered the stack of magazines across Erik's desk. "And unfortunately for you, it involves me, a Reaper, reaping the soul of you, a man. Now, if you'll just come along..."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Erik turned back around and looked up to where Death's eyes should be. "Not until I finish my book."

This is why Death hated writers.

"Look Erik, I don't care about your book. Nobody cares about your book."

"I don't care."

"What?"

"I don't care that you don't care. I care. And if I care, then you can't very well say no one cares, now can you?"

"That doesn't count."

"Why not?"

"It just doesn't. And even if it did, it wouldn't matter. Your time is almost up."

"Almost?" Erik looked at the clock on his desk. It had stopped ticking. "How much time do I have left?"

Death pulled out Erik's hourglass. The upper chamber was nearly empty.

"Not long, I'm afraid." He raised his scythe.

"Wait! Can I ask a question?"

"You just did."

"God, stop being such an asshole."

"God has nothing to do with this, Erik."

"What? How can God not have anything to do with death?"

Death lowered his scythe and sighed. "It's complicated."

"Try me." Erik leaned back in his chair.

Death checked Erik's hourglass again. There were still two grains of sand circling in the upper chamber.

"Sure, why not," he said. "Looks like I've got a few minutes to kill."

"That's not funny."

"Maybe not to you. But it kills in the office." Death placed Erik's hourglass back onto the desk. "What do you want to know?"

"What's it like?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never died."

"No, not dying. Killing."

"Killing?" Death looked appalled. "I don't kill anyone, Erik. I just pick them up."

"Well, if you don't kill

them, who does? Another Reaper?"

"No, it's not like that at all. We just do pickups."

"Then how do you decide who's doing which pickup? Why is my name on your list, and not some other Reaper's?"

"It's just the way the work is divvied up. There's the head Death, Grim, who handles all the heavy dying. Wars, famine, pestilence, that sort of thing. Not that there's all that much famine and pestilence these days. At least not as you perceive time. But war? War's like happy hour. It's always happening somewhere."

"What about the people who just die of old age, or car accidents, or heart attacks on the toilet?" Erik asked.  
"What happens to them?"

"That's where my department comes in. The 'Death Of's' and 'Death By's' and 'Death From's.' We handle the more special deaths. Like yours."

"Like mine?" Erik perked up. Maybe his death would mean something after all. "What's so special about me?"

"Nothing. Haven't you been listening?"

"You just said my death was special."

"It is. But it's only special to me, I'm afraid." He looked at Erik's finger. "It's not the who, Erik, but the how. Like I said, it's complicated."

"I can't be dying!" Erik knocked the hourglass onto the floor. A fresh dot of blood bloomed across his bandage.  
"I watch what I eat. I don't drink. Much. I don't smoke. I have a gym membership!"

"Do you go?"

"No. But I'll go right now if you just look the other way. They're open 24 hours."

"Sorry, Erik. I don't make the rules. Now if you don't mind, it's been a long century." He raised his scythe.

"It's just a stupid paper cut!"

"Yes, but it's your thousandth."

The End.

# CASE # 72028

## A DEATH BY ANY OTHER NAME

### BY LARRY HINKLE

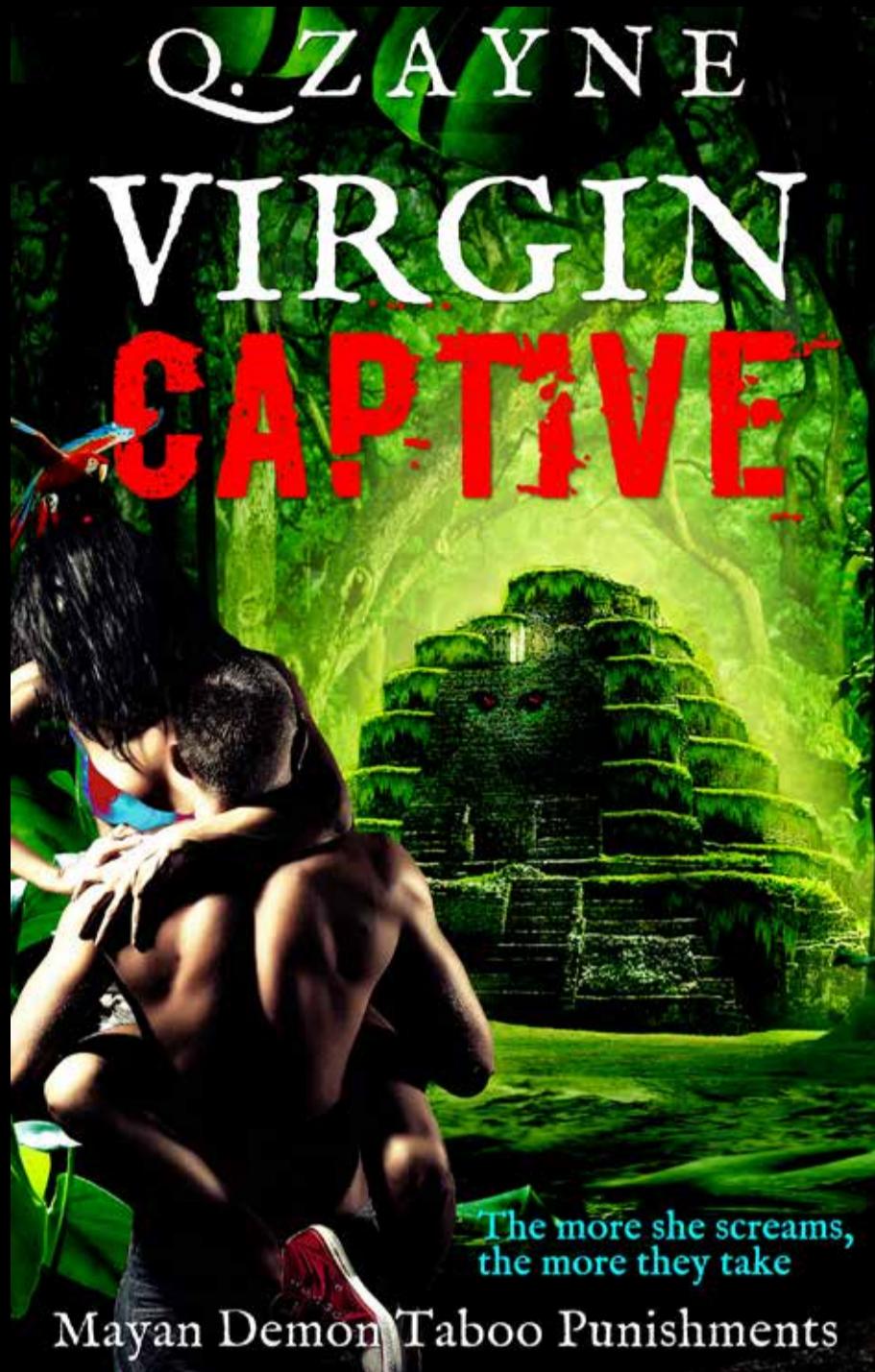


Larry Hinkle is an advertising copywriter living with his wife, two dogs, and a cat in Omaha, Nebraska. When he's not writing stories that scare people into peeing their pants, he writes ads that scare people into buying adult diapers lest they be caught peeing their pants.

His work has been published in *The Horror Zine*, *Suspense Magazine*, *Cemetery Moon*, *Theme of Absence*, *365 Tomorrows*, *The Drabblecast*, *Sanitarium Magazine*, *E.C.M.*, *The Grievous Angel*, and the anthologies *Life of the Dead*, *My Favorite Apocalypse* and *Alternate Hilarities 5: One-Star Reviews of the Afterlife*. In late 2016, he will have new stories published in *Another Dimension*, and *The Frankenstein Experiment*.

In no particular order, he loves beer, zombies, stand-up comedy, cynicism, Diet Coke, loud music, TV, skiing, camping, dogs, the colors purple, orange and black, horror, proofreaders, the Cleveland Browns, THE Ohio State University, his friends and family, and smart advertising.

He hates pretty much everything else.



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# Changing Key

by William R. Soldan

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#29717

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**CASE #: 29717**



# **CHANGING KEY**

**BY WILLIAM R. SOLDAN**

Jeff Keely stood looking at the flowers that were both strange and beautiful, amazed at how they seemed almost to breathe in the light.

"What are they?" he asked Phil, who stood there grinning in a wrinkled T-shirt, his hair thick and sandy brown, save for a small patch of gray on top. "I've never seen anything like them."

Phil was Jeff's longtime friend. The two had lived together for a while almost ten years earlier and grown pot in the basement just for kicks. That was before Jeff married Beth and moved across town. It wasn't until after Jeff left that Phil discovered he had a real knack for growing things. The couple buckets full of dirt they'd started with quickly became a full-scale operation, one which occupied the entire basement as well as an upstairs bedroom. Phil was an electrician and a plumber by trade and had built a hydroponic system from scratch out of PVC tubing, sawhorses, and various other hardware supplies. But living in the thick of Ohio State University's north campus, he soon got paranoid and, rather than shutting down and having all his hard work go to waste, started growing vegetables. At thirty years old, the inherent risk of illegal activity no longer seemed worth it.

"Neither have I," Phil said. "No one has. It's something completely new."

"What do you mean new?"

"There's nothing like it in existence—until now, anyway."

"You somehow created a new species of flower?" Jeff said in a skeptical tone. This was a bit of a stretch, he thought, even for Phil.

Phil's superior intelligence likely qualified him for a career with NASA, MIT, or some clandestine government agency. His continually shifting obsessions, however, were to the degree that many who knew him called him crazy. But to Jeff, he wasn't crazy, just restless. As Phil's knowledge of growing plants evolved—water and soil PH, temperature, lighting cycles—so did his curiosity and compulsion to experiment. He soon began tinkering with fertilizer levels and various other chemical components (he also fancied himself a novice chemist), which resulted in lettuce that grew over three feet high and cucumbers that grew to be the size of watermelons. Eventually, though, the vegetables were impossible to keep up with—Phil said he literally couldn't eat them or give them away fast enough—so he moved on to a new endeavor: flowers, both exotic and mundane. But the flowers that now sprouted before Jeff from several squares of rock wool, their iridescent leaves shimmering beneath the bright glow and low hum of the lamps, were neither; they were something else entirely. *Otherworldly* was the word that came to Jeff's mind.

"So," Jeff finally said, "how'd you do it?"

Phil grinned. "That's the mystery."

"Mystery," Jeff echoed, as if he were preparing himself for one of Phil's grandiose monologues.

"You see," Phil said, "I've been playing with cross pollination for a while, creating various hybrids. Here, look at this." He walked to the far end of the table where there were a bunch of pink and white and yellow blossoms. Jeff recognized them from across the room as lilies. They were Beth's favorite.

"They're lilies, big deal."

"Look closer," Phil said.

As Jeff moved closer, he realized that they were lilies, but not quite. What was it? He tried to access what little knowledge he'd inadvertently retained as the result of Beth's almost insatiable love of gardening, but he couldn't place the purple pillar of tiny blossoms that sprouted from the center of each.

"That's hyacinth in the center," said Phil. "And then there's this, here."

Phil moved back down the table in the direction of the strange new flower, stopping halfway to point at another hybrid.

"Is that," Jeff asked, "a rose and—"

"An iris," Phil interrupted.

"How the hell did you pull this off, Phil?"

"Nothing one can't learn if he just puts in the hours."

Jeff was silent for a moment and then said, "Wouldn't these *all* be new species, technically?" He gestured at tulips with violets in their centers, petunias crossed with brown-eyed Susans, dahlias that weren't quite dahlias, and at least half a dozen more he couldn't identify.

"Well, yes and no," Phil said. "While these *are* new in the sense that they're crossbreeds that don't appear in nature, they're still distinctly what they are."

Jeff looked confused, as though Phil had just given him a riddle to solve.

"Meaning?" he asked.

"Meaning that those lilies are distinctly lilies, bred with hyacinth. Both species are distinguishable not only through their phenotypes but also their genotypes."

"Speak English, Phil."

"Their physical appearance and their genetic makeup. The same goes for all of these. They're only unique because they had to be modified to grow this way. Apart from that, they're just common flowers that got a little intimate with one another. Anyone could pull it off with some patience and a little know-how."

"Okay," said Jeff. "So what's the deal with these things?" He moved back to the head of the table and was again standing above the vibrant blossoms. They seemed to pulse with light.

"Again," Phil said, "that's the mystery. I came in here about a week or so ago and there they were, only much smaller. They were just little sprouts in some of the extra pieces of rock wool that I had set into the table, but I hadn't planted anything in them yet. I was thinking of trying to cross a sunflower with a poppy—just think... wouldn't that be a trip?"

Phil's digression seemed to pull him away from the moment briefly, but he quickly snapped out of it.

"Anyway," he continued, "I came in and there were these little sprouts. My first guess was the rock wool had somehow been pollinated by some of the other flowers. But you can't pollinate something that's not alive. So then I was thinking it must have absorbed some of the water flow from the table, nutrients that had collected in the tubes or something, but there was no water running through this tube. And unlike the other breeds in here, these ones not only seem grow at a ridiculous rate, but they don't share traits of these other flowers—hell, any flowers *anywhere* that I've ever seen. I've spent the last several nights trying to figure it out, but I keep coming up with nothing. I'm stumped."

Jeff couldn't look away from the things. They were so beautifully strange. Their leaves had the sheen of mother-of-pearl and their stems were a deep green with smudges of orange where the leaves branched off from the main stalks. The flowers themselves, which vaguely resembled orchids but somehow far more exotic, were the color of soft lavender, darkening to a deep purple, almost black, at the edges. Throughout the flowers' soft, pastel centers were white spots and veins of yellow that bled their way toward the tips of the petals, so vivid and bright it was as if they'd glow in the dark if the power went out. Nestled deep in the very center of each blossom, where the stamens and pistils seemed to almost writhe, was a smaller flower—no bigger than a shirt button—that looked eerily like an eye. For a moment, one seemed to flutter, but Jeff tossed off the idea as just a trick of the light. They smelled wonderful, and as he leaned in closer the scent, like lilacs and honey, made his head swim.

He felt a sense of inexplicable happiness rise in him. He thought of Beth, how much this would fascinate her, especially since it was still December and she wouldn't be able to immerse herself in her own garden for at least another three months.

The thought of surprising Beth with one of these flowers moved Jeff from happiness to elation.

"Say, Phil," Jeff said, sounding slightly sedated. "You think I might be able to have one of these, a little something for Beth?"

Phil seemed to ponder it for a moment, then said, "Well, I suppose so. But don't either of you let anyone else know about it. I still want to try to figure out where the hell these things came from."

He carefully pulled one of the cubes of rock wool from the hydro table. Translucent roots wormed their way out the bottom, and Phil quickly grabbed a Styrofoam cup from a stack on the shelf next to the timer that

controlled the lights, humidity, and air flow in the room. He placed the rock wool in the cup and said, "And don't worry about water or sunlight; so far they seem indifferent to light levels and keep growing without water or nutrients. It's a complete mind fuck, really."

Phil crossed one arm over his middle and propped the other one on it, scratching his stubbly chin like a man who's all out of ideas.

Jeff headed for the door, taking another whiff of the flower as he went. "Thanks, Phil," he said. "Beth's going to trip when she sees this thing."

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Jeff took the scenic route toward the Columbus suburb of Dublin where he and Beth owned a condo. He and Beth had been together for the better part of a decade, and although they'd rarely spent a moment apart in that time, they'd always managed to maintain their initial passion for each other. With the exception of the occasional squabble about whose turn it was to scoop the litter box or do the dishes, they'd never succumbed to the tumultuous interplay that often plagued the relationships of so many of their friends. Beth was the one person who supported him when everyone else told him to grow up and give up his dream of being a writer. "I believe in you," she always assured him. And although he'd taken a teaching job at the community college so they weren't forced to rely solely on the modest income she made at the chemical dependency clinic where she worked, she never let him put off his writing for the sake of paying bills. "We'll manage," she'd say. "Don't give up."

But while they always prided themselves on having a solid, healthy relationship, the truth was they were in a rut. It used to be they'd greet each day together with a sense of anticipation and willingness to experience any and every new thing. Lately, though, they merely awoke and diverged into their respective routines: he would have coffee and oatmeal and watch The Weather Channel; she would have coffee, check her e-mail, and play a couple rounds of online Scrabble. Then it was off to the races, mechanically going through the motions, each day a little more detached.

The mild swimming sensation Jeff had experienced while in the humidity of Phil's indoor garden still lingered, but the fresh air on the walk from the house to the car had revived him somewhat. While he mused on his and Beth's current situation, he had a sense of optimism that he hadn't experienced in a long time. They still loved each other, of that he had no doubt. They just needed something to rekindle the spark. He felt positive they'd overcome whatever it was that was causing their emotional disconnect. After all, they still communicated better than most couples, he thought. Sure, they seemed rather indifferent to each other lately, but they both acknowledged it and were usually able to talk it out. It's good for couples to have interests separate from one another, they'd agreed, an important part of a healthy relationship.

Yet this communication, this understanding of each other's feelings, was often no more than a brief reconciliation, after which they'd slip back into a mutual state of listlessness.

Jeff's new optimism, however, dismissed the negative thought in favor of a more pleasant one: Beth's face lighting up with the smile he first fell in love with so many years ago.

Just then, while immersed in thoughts of Beth, as he drove through the intersection at Olentangy and Henderson, Jeff began to notice a faint humming sound coming from the heating vents.

"Come on now," he said to the dashboard.

The Buick's heater had been on the fritz ever since a reckless Firebird T-boned him into a parked pick-up truck earlier that month. Jeff raised his hand, preparing to hit the dash with his fist but paused when he felt a steady rush of hot air. He opened his palm, moving it back and forth. The heater wasn't the problem. In fact, it was working without the slightest hiccup this afternoon. Ruling out the faulty heater as the cause of the noise, Jeff became all the more unnerved by the sound's presence. And it actually seemed to be getting louder.

Maybe it's the engine, he thought.

He found a spot on the side of the road where it straightened out for about a quarter mile and pulled over, put the car in park, and killed the ignition. The humming was still there, even louder in the absence of the engine's rumble. He looked around for a few moments, clueless, then located the source of the sound. *What the hell?* he thought. It was coming from the flower, nestled in its rock wool and Styrofoam cup. But how could that be? The hum was now more of a high-pitched ringing—but still somehow pleasant—rising up out the flower's center like feedback from a miniature speaker. After his initial bewilderment, Jeff suddenly remembered having heard the sound before—earlier at Phil's place. He'd simply thought the humming was coming from the massive grow lights that illuminated the garden. But now he realized that beneath the more obvious sounds of the lights, fans, and hydroponic table, he'd been hearing the flowers.

Feeling both perplexed and something else he couldn't quite identify, Jeff leaned in closer, his face hovering above the blossom. As he stared into its eyelike center, inhaling a fresh stream of its sweet, delicious fragrance, it blinked and dilated, the golden iris drowning in the black of the pupil.

He pulled back, thinking, *No way*. But before he could rationalize what he'd just seen, Jeff cast aside the strange occurrence as his head again filled with a tingling cloud.

With a smile on his face that somehow made him look both enlightened and stupid, Jeff placed one hand on the steering wheel and with the other put the car in gear. He felt almost weightless as he pulled back onto the road. It began to rain, so he turned on the windshield wipers. He was pleased by the combination of sounds around him: the soothing swoosh of the Buick's tires rolling along the wet road, the wipers' consistent backbeat tempo, and the flower's ringing, which had gradually risen into a beautiful one-note chorus.

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Jeff stepped through the wooden gate and onto their patio. He held the flower in his hand and glanced at the barren little plot of dirt that would be Beth's garden in a few months. In the fall and winter, the space was merely a rectangle of hardened earth. Now, however, with the rain coming down, the dry ground was turning to mud, and there were tiny little rivers beginning to flow between the cracks in the soil.

The sight of the desolate garden made Jeff even more optimistic that Beth would be thrilled with his gift. It also made him aware that he was getting soaked, as the rain had gone from heavy drizzle to downpour.

He hurried to the back steps and fumbled for a moment with his keys before getting the sliding door open and stepping into the dining room, quickly sliding the door shut behind him.

After kicking off his boots by the door, he moved to the dining room table to set the cup down. Stuck to the tabletop was a note from Beth saying she was stopping at the store for some groceries on her way home from work.

Jeff hung his coat on the rack in the corner and stepped into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. Since he had a little while before Beth returned, he thought he'd try to get some work done.

When he wasn't teaching literature at Columbus State, Jeff wrote a satirical blog highlighting current political issues, most recently focusing on the three-ring circus otherwise known as the 2004 Presidential Election. But that was just a hobby, a way for him to find some humor in what seemed like ever-darkening times. To supplement the money he brought in as an adjunct professor, he also wrote op-ed pieces for the *Columbus Dispatch*, the latest of which was due in a few days. But after some consideration, Jeff decided both of those things could wait.

What he really *should* do was try to bang out a few pages of the novel he'd been working on for the last year and a half. It had been a few weeks since he'd been able to finish a single paragraph—being too tired, too uninspired, too busy. *But today*, he told himself, *today is the day*. Jeff had come of age in the angst-filled 90s, and such positive affirmations didn't typically come easy for him. Nevertheless, there was hope and conviction behind those words.

He poured himself a cup of strong black coffee, went to the couch, and opened his laptop. Lately when he did this, he'd do little more than sit there flexing his fingers and staring at the cursor blink, blink, blinking at him from the vast expanse of white on the screen. But tonight his instincts proved to be right. After taking a sip of coffee and lighting a Camel, he placed his fingers on the keys.

At first he was shocked at how quickly it flowed out of him. He chose not to think too much, which was a surefire way to get hemmed up, instead riding the sense of well-being that he'd been on more or less since he'd left Phil's place. His fingers moved as his mind meandered in and out of the story.

When Beth called about twenty minutes later to tell him she'd be home shortly and ask if he'd come out and help with the groceries, he realized he'd written almost ten pages. *That's not possible*, he thought. *Is it?* But as he looked back down at the word count in the left-hand corner of the screen, it was as if someone slapped him; he'd hammered out three thousand words in less than a half hour. Whether they were good or not was of little consequence to him at that moment; he'd gotten something written and that's all that mattered. He'd never managed more than two thousand words in one sitting on a *good day* and, between his dreadfully slow typing and tendency to edit as he went, even that usually took him a couple hours.

He suddenly felt drained.

When Beth beeped her car horn to signal him to come out, Jeff closed the laptop and went back into the dining room. Sitting at the table, putting on his boots, he was only faintly aware of the hum and the sweet smell that lingered in the air around the table.

Outside, his fatigue seemed to melt away, and he smiled without realizing it. The rain had stopped, with the exception of a few lazy drops, and the air was crisp.

As they unloaded the bags from the trunk, Beth seemed tired.

"Long day?" he asked.

"With a capital *L*," she said, with an exaggerated look of exhaustion that resolved into a smile after a moment.

"That good, huh?"

"Can you tell me again why I became a social worker?" she said.

"Well," he said, "I think it was fixing the world one person at a time, that there's a shortage of compassionate workers in the field and someone needed to tip the scale so people can get the help they deserve."

"Jeez," she said. "I said all that?"

"Almost verbatim. But, it's Friday. The downtrodden will survive without you for a couple days."

In spite of her weariness, she let out a small chuckle and nudged him with her elbow.

"How about you?" she asked. "Anything new and exciting in the world of academia?"

"New and exciting?" he said. "Well, if you call Shakespeare new and trying to get classes of unenthused sophomores to find him brilliant *exciting*, then sure." He switched the bag in his right hand to his left and slid the door open. "But it's more consistent than freelance. And as I said, 'it's Friday'."

Setting the bags on the floor by the table, he told her about the ten pages he'd finished.

"That's amazing, baby," she said, putting one arm around his waist and running the fingers of her other hand through his messy brown hair. She kissed him on the neck and said, "I'm proud of you."

"I was pretty impressed with myself," he said.

"Can I read it?" she asked, eagerly.

"It's not finished yet."

She looked him in the eye and grinned. "It'll happen. Trust the process."

He laughed at this, said, "What a social worker thing to say," and returned her kiss.

But Beth's grin faded. Suddenly, she looked not only tired but distraught, her face growing tense and flush.

"What is it?" he asked. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine. It's just been a long day."

"Are you sure?"

His persistence seemed to hit a nerve. She snapped, "Yes—Christ! I said I'm fine. Give it a rest."

Jeff was shocked. It was as if their pleasant, playful conversation only moments ago had never happened. She'd gone from tired affection to lashing out so quickly it was uncanny.

As a gesture of apology for whatever it was that he'd said to cause her mood swing, he turned to the table and picked up the cup in which the flower was nested, and held it out to her.

"I brought you something," he said.

She eyed it for a moment. "What is it?"

"It's something that Phil grew. He says it's some sort of mystery flower or something. Here, take a closer look. Isn't it bizarre?"

As he reached out to her, raising the flower, Beth took a step back.

"Don't you like it?" he asked. "Smell it. It smells fantastic."

She hesitated, and leaned forward. Her straight auburn hair framed her face, which was still clenched in distress. Before she even got close enough to inhale the flower's fragrance, she backed away again and brought her hand to her head, walking backward into the kitchen and bracing herself on the counter.

"My God, Beth. What's wrong with you?"

"My head . . ." she cried.

Then, as if by reflex, Beth grabbed a drinking glass from the counter and hurled it in Jeff's direction. He barely got out of its trajectory before it exploded against the dining room wall, leaving him so stunned that he could do little more than stand there with wide eyes, his mouth agape, dumbfounded.

"What the fuck?" he said, putting the Styrofoam cup back on the table. In his confusion, Jeff hadn't noticed that the flower had begun to hum again, and the eye in its center had gone completely black.

For the next couple days, Beth was virtually bed-ridden. Her skin had become pallid, the areas around her eyes looked bruised, and her temperature fluctuated from feverishly hot to clammy as fish. The couple times she attempted to leave their room and go downstairs, she initially seemed to be over the worst of whatever had overcome her that first night in the kitchen. But as soon as she'd make it to the first floor, she'd be struck by a jolt of pain strong enough to make her vision blur and her knees buckle. She'd then seem to compose herself just long enough to fly into another fit of rage, screaming and clutching her head. When Jeff, feeling utterly helpless, tried to console her, Beth began hurling knick-knacks or framed pictures. He'd finally get her back upstairs and into bed, where she'd lay murmuring to herself unintelligibly before drifting off again into a fitful sleep.

Being the only thing Jeff felt he could do in this situation, he called the rehab facility where Beth worked and told them she'd come down with the flu and, due to the severity of it, wouldn't be in for at least a few days. He then sent out a mass e-mail to his students, cancelling class for the remainder of the week due to a family emergency. "I'm sure they'll be just devastated," he said to himself, knowing very well that a week free of plays and Elizabethan poetry would certainly be cause for celebration among the majority of his students. As an afterthought, he left them instructions to finish the rest of the week's assigned readings and be prepared for a class discussion the following Monday before hitting SEND.

He spent the next hour finishing up his column for the *Dispatch*, meeting the deadline by minutes, and clearing out his various inboxes before finally closing the laptop.

For a while he just sat there at the table in the dining room, drinking a cup of coffee and chain-smoking. He gazed outside at the patio. It was gray in the overcast afternoon light and covered with three inches of fresh snow. The night of Beth's first episode, the temperature had dropped significantly, and the snow accumulated slowly but steadily ever since.

Staring out at the white ground through a haze of smoke, which hovered above the table like a stratus cloud, he continued wracking his brain for some sort of explanation as to why Beth had so suddenly seemed to lose her mind.

Once, about seven or eight years earlier, Beth had been finishing up her undergrad while Jeff was working as a short-order cook and writing music reviews for the *Columbus Alive*. He'd scored them free tickets to a jamband called Peach Melba at the Newport. They were a bit wild in those days and had each dropped some acid before the show. Sometime after the drugs had kicked in, Beth went through a similar episode.

The band had taken a set break about an hour or so in, and when they returned to the stage, they were garbed in sixties-rock attire and launched into an unexpected tribute to The Doors. It was during a frenzied rendition of "Celebration of the Lizard" that something went wrong. Beth started acting strange. Jeff noticed that from behind she'd begun moving in an odd way, her body language appearing just a little off. At first he figured he was just imagining it, but her movements became more jerky and sporadic, and when Beth turned to him, what he saw in her eyes was a look of complete madness. He considered briefly that he too was on a psychedelic drug and was steadily losing his hold on reality, but the girl he was looking at was someone else, someone who clearly didn't know who or where she was. When he asked her if she was okay, she huddled in close to him, frightened and trembling like a child after a nightmare. Then, as he began to embrace her and tell her everything was going to be okay—that it was just the drugs—she quickly pushed him away, looking at him in utter terrified

confusion, as if he were a total stranger. Something in her mind had snapped.

He quickly got his arm around her, tight enough that he could steer her toward the exit but not so tight as to cause her to panic any further and run off. Once outside, he was able to get her the several blocks back to their apartment while, in his own warped state, the world seemed to twist and bend all around him. The entire way Beth was as rigid as a board, allowing Jeff to hold her close while every few minutes almost running into the path of a passing car.

When she awoke the next day, feeling somewhat strung out but otherwise herself, Beth didn't have much recollection of the previous night's events. It wasn't until Jeff recapped the incident that she began to remember what had happened, and even then her memory of the experience was fragmented. "I kept feeling like someone or something was after me," she'd said the next day. "It was like there was some plot against me, by no one and everyone all at the same time. I don't know. I don't know how else to explain it."

That was the day they both agreed that hallucinogenic drugs—fun as they were at one time—were no longer an option; the party was officially over.

As he sat at the table, remembering how Beth had seemed to completely come unhinged that night all those years ago, Jeff couldn't help but feel that maybe her mind hadn't fully recovered. He'd heard of people having flashbacks but always thought such stories were highly exaggerated, if not complete bullshit. Could it be that Beth had had one?

He gave it some thought but wasn't satisfied with this explanation. There was certainly a similarity between the two episodes, but this time Beth didn't seem lost, confused, and disconnected. Quite the opposite, actually; this time she appeared quite aware of who and where she was, and the look in her eyes wasn't that of a frightened child, but of a seething fury.

What perplexed him even more than the suddenness of her behavior was how *great* he'd felt this whole time. Even through his shock, even now as he sat smoking cigarettes, unable to come up with a satisfying answer, Jeff felt incredible.

Downing the last gulp of his coffee, which had gotten cold while he was lost in thought, he snuffed out his cigarette in the glass ashtray and reached across the table, sliding the strange flower into a position directly in front of him.

"I really thought she was going to love you," he said to the flower, as if it could understand him and he felt the need to apologize.

He could hear the faint hum of the plant, which he realized had never really ceased entirely; instead it would just become more or less audible, seemingly at random, as if someone had adjusted the volume on a radio. The center once again looked like a cat's eye in sunlight: a slit of black surrounded by a shimmering, golden iris. So strange, he thought, how it changed, dilating almost to the point of complete blackness at times but constricting to a sliver of black in a golden orb at others.

He stuck his nose so close the petals almost brushed his cheeks. He breathed in the sweet fragrance and it happened: the eye dilated.

"That's so weird," he whispered, and smiled in spite of everything that had happened.

Leaning back in his chair and lighting another cigarette, Jeff inhaled deeply and let out three perfectly formed smoke rings just as his phone rang in the other room.

Although his instincts told him to just ignore the call and relish the warm, carefree feeling, his cell wasn't

on vibrate, and he didn't want it to disturb Beth. He quickly got up and checked the caller ID on the screen before deciding whether to answer or dismiss the call. It was Phil.

"What's up Phil?" he said, exhaling a thick plume of smoke.

"I need you to come over ASAP," Phil said, his voice calm but earnest.

"Now's really not a good time, Phil. Beth's been sick for the last few days."

"Sick? What's wrong with her?"

"I don't really know. She had some sort of episode the other night. She's barely gotten out of bed since."

"What do you mean *episode*?"

"Shit, man, she was fine when she got home Friday, but then out of nowhere she started screaming and throwing dishes. She was clutching her damn head like it was about to burst open. When I finally got her into bed she seemed to be getting better, but then she tried to get up and come downstairs a couple times and it happened all over again. She nearly got me in the head with one of our wedding pictures."

"How are you feeling?" Phil asked with an added sense of urgency.

"I feel great, actually. In fact, I've felt damn good ever since leaving your place on Friday. Better than I've felt in a long time."

There was silence for a moment, but then Phil said, "Jeff, you need to get over here right now. But first I need you to get rid of that flower I let you take."

"I told you, I really don't think I should leave Beth like this. And what do you mean? Why should I get rid of—?"

"Just do it," he said. "I'll explain when you get here."

Phil clearly wasn't going to take no for an answer, and although Jeff had no idea what he was going on about, he decided to humor him.

"Okay, I'll be there," he said. "Just let me check on her first."

"Fine; just get rid of the flower," Phil insisted. "No—destroy it. Burn it. Make sure there's nothing left."

"I really wish you'd just tell me what the hell you're talking about, Phil."

"It'll make a lot more sense if I can show you. But if I'm right about this, you need to destroy that thing immediately. Just trust me."

Jeff rolled his eyes, but rather than continue trying to squeeze an explanation from Phil, which was proving to be a losing battle, he went along with it.

"I'll be there soon," he said.

He thumbed the phone's touch-screen, ending the call, and stood there for a moment, staring out the window. It would be getting dark soon.

Stepping back into the dining room to put out his cigarette, Jeff looked at the flower on the table. Its volume and tone had changed again while he was on the phone, but the ringing was so high-pitched it was almost inaudible.

What was Phil babbling about? *Destroy it. Burn it.*

"Yeah, sure," Jeff said aloud, heading upstairs to check on Beth.

When Phil answered the door, he looked like he'd been on a week-long bender. His hair was a mess, his eyes bloodshot and droopy. "What the hell happened to you?" Jeff asked. "You look like hell."

"Just get in here," Phil said, ushering Jeff inside, quickly shutting and locking the door behind him.

"You know," Jeff snapped as he followed Phil through the cluttered hallway toward the basement steps, "I really don't see why you couldn't just tell me what the deal is over the phone. If you dragged me all the way across town when Beth is sick in bed just to go off on some half-cocked tangent, I'm going to be pissed."

Phil turned around abruptly at the bottom of the steps. "Did you burn it?" he asked.

"What?" Jeff said, only half-listening as he almost collided with Phil.

"The flower—did you burn it like I told you?"

"No I didn't burn it. For Christ's sake, Phil—why would I set fire to a damn flower? I'm tired of playing this game, trying to decipher your cryptic rants."

Phil lowered his eyes and shook his head. "Damn it," he said. "Fuck it . . . never mind." He seemed instantly more frazzled than he was a moment ago. "It's just . . . I think I know why Beth had her . . . *episode*."

Jeff's impatience reached its breaking point. He grabbed Phil by the collar of his shirt. "What the fuck do you mean?" he said. "You better tell me why the hell you called me over here, and tell me now. What do you know about Beth?"

Jeff had him pinned against the wall on the landing at the bottom of the steps, but released him after only a few moments. Phil's expression of weary surprise then settled back into the look of someone trying to make sense of something inexplicable.

"Just come on," he said.

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Beth awoke covered in sweat, her pillow soaked. As she sat up in bed, the room was dark, except for a glowing red square where the light of a lamp-post outside bled through the blinds. She was cold and shaking.

Getting out of bed, she crossed the room to retrieve a quilt from the back of a chair. After wrapping it around herself, she moved to the bathroom. Still not fully awake, her throat was parched and her head throbbed. Without turning on any lights, she went for a drink of water and some aspirin in the bathroom, feeling her way by memory.

Returning to the room, she curled up on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest. There she shivered herself back into a restless sleep, carried by the pulsing sound of her own heart.

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The basement was a veritable labyrinth of crudely constructed rooms that Phil had built from two-by-fours and sheetrock. Within the confines of each was a different set-up of lights, timers, and plant life. Near the end of a narrow hall, the drywall gave way to opaque plastic sheets flanking either side and draped haphazardly ahead of them.

Phil pulled the sheet aside and stepped into a rather spacious area located in the corner farthest from where they'd come down the steps. It was empty, save for a stack of dirty five-gallon buckets, some large bags of potting

soil, and a wooden workbench, above which hung two tubes of fluorescent lighting. On the bench sat a large aquarium. Jeff noticed that Phil had modified it to make it taller. Inside were the strange flowers that only a few days earlier had been in the room upstairs. They'd grown taller. Not by much—only a few inches—but noticeably so. Their leaves still shimmered, the iridescence like an oil stain on wet cement.

"So did you figure out where the hell they came from?" Jeff asked, not really caring but hoping the question would prompt Phil to get to the point.

"Where they came from?" Phil said. "No. But as I was scouring my books and running some tests, I stumbled across something else, something that goes way beyond botany."

"Well?" Jeff said, frustrated.

"I was upstairs examining the roots of the things," Phil said, "convinced it had to have been something inside the hydro table that had somehow caused this genetic anomaly—bacteria or something, a freak accident—anyway, I began feeling a disoriented, dizzy sensation. Figured the flowers must be releasing some sort of chemical, making it hard for me to concentrate. I started getting mixed up but at the same time it was a pleasant feeling, you know?"

Jeff did know, but he didn't say anything, just shrugged, not wanting to interrupt now that Phil was finally talking.

"So I brought them down here and put them in this glass case, thinking if it was a chemical I could contain it. But that's when I heard the humming." Jeff's eyes widened a bit at this. "At first I thought it was the grow lights; there're so many things running up there that it's almost impossible to trace any one sound to any one thing. It wasn't till after I got them down here, behind the glass, that I noticed the hum. And I knew it wasn't the fluorescents, either." He gestured at the fixture above the table. "They're pretty quiet after a few minutes; the sound I was hearing was clear as day, and it seemed to get louder the closer I got to the flowers."

Jeff lost what little patience he'd regained after almost choking Phil at the foot of the stairs.

"Great," he said. "So the flower hums. I won't deny that it's strange fuckin' shit, dumbfounding even. But what's that got to do with Beth? Quit jerking me around."

"Look, I'm trying to explain as simply as I can," Phil insisted. "Please, bear with me."

Jeff shifted from foot to foot, crossed his arms over his chest.

"I was sitting here, baffled," Phil continued. "I'd forgotten all about trying to figure out where they came from; now I was stumped with how the hell a flower—granted, a genetic mystery—could be producing a sound. Not to mention what could be causing the stoned feeling."

"And?" Jeff said.

"And I'm pretty sure the sound is what caused the sensation," Phil said. "I didn't come to that conclusion immediately, of course; I just assumed that what I was feeling was residual, from before I contained the things. But sometime in the middle of the night, the cats were nosing around down here, acting really weird."

"Weird." Jeff repeated.

"Cisco was acting unusually affectionate, like he was in heat or something, which is ridiculous, and Jazzy—who's usually the lovable one—was behaving like some feral stray; she was clawing at the wall and biting at the air, started shitting all over the place. But when I got them both upstairs and they were fine. Jazzy seemed, I don't know . . . weak and dazed, but not like when she was down here. That's when it occurred to me that the sound of that damn flower was somehow causing their reactions, drastically different as they were. I also realized that the dizziness I felt wasn't residual but being caused by my continuous proximity to the thing."

"So this euphoria I've been experiencing and Beth's freak out were both caused by the flower?" Jeff asked, not entirely able to—perhaps not willing to—wrap his brain around the possibility. "Give me a break, Phil."

"Wait here," Phil said. He ducked out of the makeshift room and Jeff heard him clamor up the steps. He was back in less than a minute, carrying a small plastic cage containing a white mouse. Phil placed the cage on top of the glass case that housed the flowers, stepped back, and said, "Watch this."

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Again, she awoke, this time pulled into consciousness by a need to urinate. The throbbing in her head had somewhat abated, but she felt weak and barely made it there on time.

Besides the distant beat of blood in her temples, the place was silent.

After relieving herself in darkness, she turned on the light in the bathroom and was shocked and confused at the sight of herself in the mirror. She was as pale as a corpse, and her hair hung like seaweed from her scalp. She put a hand to her face, as if hoping it was a window she was looking through, at some other poor woman, rather than her own reflection. The woman in the glass mimicked her, and she let out a quivering moan. Fear inched its way up her spine. It was too quiet.

"Jeff?" she called out, her voice unsteady. But there was no reply. Stepping out of the bathroom, she called for him again, louder this time, and for a few moments she just stood at the top of the steps, waiting in silence. Finally, when there was still no answer, she slowly made her way to the downstairs landing.

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At first the mouse simply circled its little cage, acting no different than one would expect. Then, after a moment, it stopped moving around and just stood there, staring at the two men on the other side of the glass. The flowers' hum was audible, though dampened by the thick walls of the case. Suddenly, the mouse began twitching and, after another moment or so, rose on its haunches, fleshy tail thrashing. It scratched and gouged itself until its little face tore open. Blood turned its white fur pink.

"What the hell?" Jeff uttered. The mouse was now gnawing at the base of its tail. "What's happening to it?" "It's going crazy," Phil replied.

Soon the mouse had ripped its own tail completely off and proceeded to try burrowing through the corner of its prison. It finally collapsed, twitching a few more times as life leaked from its body and a scarlet puddle slowly formed on the floor of the cage.

"You see?" Phil asked, as if the evidence was irrefutable.

Jeff just stood there silently, looking at the macabre display in front of him. He searched for the right words. "Okay—that was seriously fucked up," he said.

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She made it as far as the dining room, when the pounding in her head became deafening. It felt as though someone was squeezing her brain like a sponge.

Beth covered her ears in an attempt to block out the sound, but her effort was in vain.

On the table, the flower pulsed and shifted, turning its head toward her. But Beth didn't see. Her vision blurred as she stumbled backward into the living room. And suddenly, blinded by a sharp jolt that spread from the center of her forehead through the rest of her body like electricity, she lost control.

Thrashing about wildly, she overturned the bookshelf. A lamp came down, shattering as it hit the floor. Tears flooded her eyes as she clawed at her temples, drawing blood. Staggering frantically for the stairs, her legs betrayed her. She crawled and scrambled, clutching the carpet in her fist as she pulled herself toward the top of the steps.

As the flower's note rung out, it danced in its cup like a snake in a basket, shimmering brightly and following Beth with its shiny black eye.

She made it upstairs, but the sound still drilled into her core, and she collapsed outside the bedroom door. Blood mixed with tears trickled down her face as she tried to dig the pain out of her skull.

When at last the darkness showed some small mercy and dragged her back into unconsciousness, Beth had given up the fight. Even her sobs seemed involuntary, like the tremors that rattled through her bones.

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Phil took a deep breath, paused as if he wasn't sure how to proceed. "Have you ever heard of sympathetic vibration?" he asked.

"Like when you hit a key on a piano and all the other octaves of the same note vibrate in unison," Jeff said, surprised by how quickly he was able to answer the question. "What about it?"

"This is going to sound crazy," Phil said, "but hear me out. There are two physical laws that seem to be the basis for what we just saw. The first is the Law of Attraction, which simply describes two bodies vibrating at the same frequency, caused by the vibration of one and the sympathetic vibration of the other. And I'm not talking about sending good vibes out into the cosmos for financial gain or whatever—it doesn't exactly work like that. The second is the Law of Repulsion, which describes two bodies vibrating in discord."

Phil paused. "You still with me?"

"I'm listening."

"So these laws are nothing new; there were scientists a hundred years ago toying with these ideas. They basically believed that every physical structure consists of an array of different frequencies, all combining and making up the structure's *fundamental* frequency. Now think about this: Mice, flowers, human beings—we're all just molecules, man. Physical structures. Which makes us subject to these laws just like anything else. Why do you think we get along so much better with certain people than with others?"

Jeff didn't know what to say; he still wasn't entirely sure where this was going.

"It's because our *frequencies* are in greater harmony with those people," Phil went on. "Yet when we come in contact with someone we're not in tune with, they often come across as abrasive or insufferable. And I think it's these frequencies—harmonic and discordant—that the flowers feed on."

Jeff continued to take in Phil's theory, despite how out of his depth he felt. What Phil was saying actually kind of made sense to him—in a bad science-fiction movie sort of way.

"So when a body—be it a cat, mouse, or human being—comes into close enough proximity with the vibration

of a harmonizing body, the attraction grows stronger. The vibration increases, and it does so continuously until it's disrupted. I think that's why I look and feel like death warmed over: the increased intensity of my own vibration is taking its toll—like a high note about to shatter glass." The accuracy of the analogy briefly caused a look of worry to creep into Phil's face.

"And in the case of discord," Jeff said, "things just . . . go to hell?"

"When the frequencies converge, the clash is just too much for the body to stand," Phil said, nodding. "Next thing you know—instant freak out." Phil bent forward, his nose almost pressing against the glass case. "What I don't know," he added, "is whether there's a withdrawal effect."

Jeff suddenly remembered waking up in the middle of the night, sweating, aching, bowels in knots. It had reminded him of stories he'd heard, of dope addicts kicking cold turkey. And just like the parts in those stories, when the junkie caved in and fixed up, when he got near the flower, he felt better almost immediately, his sickness falling from him like shed skin.

Phil looked haggard. He needed to be away from the flowers before he completely deteriorated. As if coming to this conclusion himself, he said, "Let's go back upstairs. I need to sit down."

As they headed down the narrow corridor and through the maze of mini grow-rooms, finally moving up the steps to the living room, Jeff said, "So you think Beth's *vibration* or *frequency* or whatever was in discord with the flower. But what I don't understand is if Beth and I harmonized, causing us to be attracted to one another, then why'd she clash with the flower and I didn't?"

Phil thought about that for a moment, sitting on the tan leather sofa, and said, "People's frequencies can change due to various factors."

"Such as?" Jeff asked.

"Such as disease, mental disturbances, even the common cold, I suppose. At least that's the talk in the New Age circles. There're so-called healers out there applying sound waves to cancer patients. It's all over the internet, man. Only I think they refer to it as a person's aura, not frequency. Still, the notion is the same: a person can go out of tune and be re-tuned. It's all considered fringe, witchdoctor-type stuff. But I don't know . . ."

Phil trailed off.

*Mental disturbances*, Jeff thought, remembering how earlier he'd been sitting at the table, thinking about the time he and Beth had eaten acid and she had what could easily be described as a psychotic break from the rational world—a *mental disturbance*. He thought about how, although their relationship had remained the envy of all their friends and co-workers, she was never quite the same again; how, since that night, she'd displayed a faint vulnerability and mistrust of others that wasn't there before.

And what about the emotional rut they'd been in for the last year or so? While they still seemed to be in tune most days, it was as though she were now in a different key. Could it be? Had Beth's frequency changed?

Jeff's mind circled with speculation. But he had no way of knowing for sure. That is, until he went home and did what Phil had told him to do in the first place: destroy the flower. If Phil was right—and judging by the demonstration with the mouse and what he'd seen happen to Beth, he was pretty much convinced—Jeff had to get home quickly. Beth seemed to be safe in bed when he left, but what if she'd gotten up and gone downstairs? She was alone with that thing. The thought made his stomach tighten.

"I've got to get home—now," Jeff said, jumping to his seat.

"I'm going to torch those fucking things," Phil said. "And I suggest you do the same."

As Jeff rushed out the door, Phil called after him.

"And you know the craziest thing?" he shouted. "We still don't know where they came from." He forced a tired laugh.

*That's the least crazy part of this whole trip,* Jeff thought, pulling the door closed without responding.

He was overcome by a sense of foreboding. Outside, night had fallen, and everything had taken on a shadowy quality. The only evidence of the day was a few streaks of pink and blue in the sky, barely visible through the membrane of light pollution from the surrounding campus.

In the car he uttered a sort of half-prayer—*Please be okay*—and the Buick spit gravel as he put it to the floor.

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Jeff rushed into the condo and feared the worst when he saw the condition of the living room. The tall corner lamp was knocked over and the glass dish that surrounded the bulb had shattered, leaving shards of white glass strewn across the carpet. The bookshelf was on its side—paperback books had spilled onto the floor, some of which had been torn into pieces—and a painting of a tower in a field of roses hung crooked on the wall at the foot of the stairs.

Jeff hurried to the bedroom and there, on the second floor landing, he found her. She'd collapsed in a heap just outside the bedroom door. As he crouched down, he saw that she was still breathing, though it seemed labored and wheezy. He turned her over. She had scratches on her forehead near the temples, and when he looked at her hands he saw that the nail of the middle finger on her right hand had broken at a jagged angle; two had ripped completely off of her left—they lay on the carpet, bloody and frayed. He checked her pulse. It was racing, as if she'd just exerted a great deal of energy.

"Beth," he urged. "Beth, honey, can you hear me?"

She expelled the familiar whimper of troubled unconsciousness, but otherwise didn't respond.

He picked her up gently in his arms and pushed the bedroom door open with his foot. Inside, he laid her on the bed, seeing only by the light from the hallway. He went to the medicine cabinet in the adjoining bathroom and removed a box of strip bandages and wet a washcloth in the sink. After cleaning her hands and bandaging her fingertips, he dabbed the scratches on her head and covered her up with the comforter, stroking her hair, which had become tangled and stringy from being in bed for several days. Kissing her softly on the ridge of her brow, he whispered, "You're going to be okay, baby. I'll take care of everything."

Jeff left the room, leaving the door cracked slightly, and was almost shoved down the stairs by the massive weight of his own guilt.

It was his fault. *He'd* done this to her.

There was only one thing left to do. He prayed it worked.

In the dining room, there it sat, humming its soft song. It beckoned him as he fought the attraction, the desire to smell its sweetness and gaze into its pulsing eye. He got a can of Zippo fluid from the cupboard above the stove, stuffing it into the back pocket of his jeans. Resisting its pull, but knowing he had no choice, Jeff grabbed the cup from the table, his fingers breaking through the Styrofoam. The flower's slimy roots, like tentacles, intertwined with his fingers. This tactile sensation made him queasy, but the flower's hum, which had now become a deafening onslaught in his head, was breaking his will. It was as though it knew it was being threatened.

He faltered, felt himself giving in.

Shaking away the euphoric fog, he slid the patio door open violently enough to crack the window and raced outside. Once there, he threw the flower onto the snow-covered patch of earth that was Beth's garden in the spring and stomped on it, grinding it beneath his boot heel. The flower's sound had diminished but not stopped altogether. Jeff removed the can of lighter fluid from his back pocket and his Zippo from his front, falling to his knees in the snow.

The remains of the flower seemed to spasm, its song sputtering like a car radio as it enters a tunnel, and he almost felt sympathy for it. It was still so beautiful. And the feeling ...

"I have to," he said under his breath, in the somber tone of a priest performing a murderer's last rights.

He doused the flower, emptying the can. He flipped open the lighter and spun the wheel, igniting a strong flame that billowed in the wind. But as he bowed forward, lowering the flame, as if lighting a candle for a lost loved one, a tendril shot out, encircling his wrist. Jeff dropped the lighter as it snaked up his arm. Several more coils stretched and sprang forward, missing his face, latching onto his shirt. He managed to rip himself free and reclaim the lighter, which was being reeled in by the flower's groping roots. When he finally got another flame, he tossed the lighter.

Standing at a distance, Jeff watched as it went up in a swirl of fire. The flames were threaded with colors—greens and purples and blues. A shriek, like an animal put to slaughter, rose from the blaze and drilled into the center of Jeff's forehead as he clamped his hands over his ears.

He waited until the flame had died down, made sure no trace remained before he lowered his hands.

If he'd had any lingering doubts about Phil's far out theory when he found Beth on the floor, they had been put to rest.

Now he could only wait—and hope.

When only charred dirt was left in the center of a melted circle of snow, Jeff went back inside, cleaned up the mess in the living room, and collapsed on the couch, utterly exhausted.

A few hours later, just after midnight, he awoke on the couch to a sound in the kitchen. It was Beth. She had the tea kettle on and was standing in front of the open refrigerator, staring lazily into its glow and eating a slice of left over pizza.

"Honey?" he said, uncertain of what response he'd get.

She snapped out of her daze and looked up at him.

"Hey, babe," she said. "How long have I been asleep? I'm starving."

"Well, you've been out for a while." *Is it possible, he wondered, that she has no recollection of what happened?* "You weren't feeling well," he told her. "You don't remember?"

"I remember—" She paused. "I remember having a headache."

Jeff stood silently, wondering what else she remembered.

"I must've been out cold," she added, "because I scratched the hell out of my head." She examined her hands. "Did you put these Band-Aids on my fingers?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Like you said; you were 'out cold.' You broke a few nails."

"You're too sweet," she said, moving in closer and giving him a hug, her greasy hair smelling of sweat and the lingering hint of hairspray. "But next time, don't let me sleep so long. I'm going to be up all night now."

"I called you in sick—told them you'd probably be out the rest of the week."

"The rest of the week?" she asked. "What day is it?"

Looking at the cat clock with the swaying tail on the wall beside the patio door, which said half past twelve, he said, "Technically it's Tuesday, as of about thirty minutes ago. But don't worry; your boss was fine with it. He wishes you well, said they'll get along fine without you until next Monday." He sat down at the table. "So you're feeling better?" he asked.

"I'm a little groggy, but I think some tea and another slice of pizza will fix that." Then she said, "You wanna watch a movie?"

Jeff could barely process how *normal* everything seemed. It was as if it had all been a dream—a vivid, horrible dream. Beth's scrapes and the few broken items that Jeff had managed to dispose of (and that Beth hadn't yet noticed were missing) seemed the only evidence that the last four days had even happened.

"Sure," he said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Something . . . uplifting," she said.

They always argued about what to watch, but after everything that had happened, Jeff smiled and said, "I was hoping you'd say that."

\*\*\*

Near the end of March, unseasonable warmth allowed for early planting of her garden, which Beth had looked forward to since the first frost in early October.

It was a Saturday afternoon. She was wearing the old brown suede cowboy hat that she always wore to keep the sun out of her eyes while gardening, a spaghetti-strap top, and a pair of dirty cut-off jean-shorts. She'd been on her knees in the dirt, digging little holes with her bare hands (she never wore gloves, preferring the feel of the earth crumbling in her bare palm), and dropping in the seeds one by one. She smiled, anticipating the day when the first sprouts broke through the surface. She was humming, so quietly that Jeff couldn't make out the tune—only that it reminded him of something—from where he stood at the kitchen sink.

He looked at her through the open window, and as she finished removing a rather large clump of dirt from a spot near where the garden met the fence, her humming stopped.

Jeff, who had begun washing some dishes left over from the previous night's dinner, looked up and out the window, noticing something strange—something in the way she moved. He suddenly flashed back to that night at the Newport years earlier, when he'd noticed Beth's body language had changed, becoming jerky and sporadic.

He called out the window, but she didn't respond.

She was still on her knees but had one hand held up to her head as she shifted back and forth. Jeff dropped the plate he was holding into the sink, where it cracked in half.

"Honey," he called again.

She was bent forward now, as if she were about to vomit. Her body began convulsing.

Jeff rushed to the screen door, and as he slid it open he saw Beth pick up the small trowel that was stuck in the ground beside her.

He hurried out so quickly he knocked the screen door off its track. When he got to her she'd turned the spade's tapered point toward her face. Her features were clenched and contorted. Something had hemorrhaged in one of her eyes.

"Jesus Christ," Jeff screamed. "Baby, what the—"

But he already knew.

She lashed out with her free hand, knocking him backward onto an open bag of potting soil. Dirt spewed from its open mouth.

She was muttering, "Make it stop make it stop make it stop." And just as he saw what she was about to do, the muttering erupted from her throat as an agonizing wail. "**MAKE IT SSSTOOOPPP!!!**"

Jeff jumped back to his feet, reaching her arm just before she thrust the trowel into the center of her forehead. Grabbing it, he knelt down and threw it across the patio as she fell against him.

Moments passed that felt like eternity.

It was then that he heard it. And as Jeff sat on the ground with Beth's twitching body draped across his lap, looking down at the hole in the garden where she'd removed the large clump of earth, he saw where it was coming from.

A dozen, possibly more, no bigger than shirt buttons: a cluster of eyes, black and ringed with gold, a faint fringe of purple at their edges, stared at him from the dirt.

Time seemed to stop as Jeff held Beth in his arms.

From what seemed like a great distance, he could hear her pleading, "Make it stop . . . please . . . make it stop," as his head filled with a beautiful cloud, and the flowers' chorus reached its crescendo.

The End.

**CASE #29717**

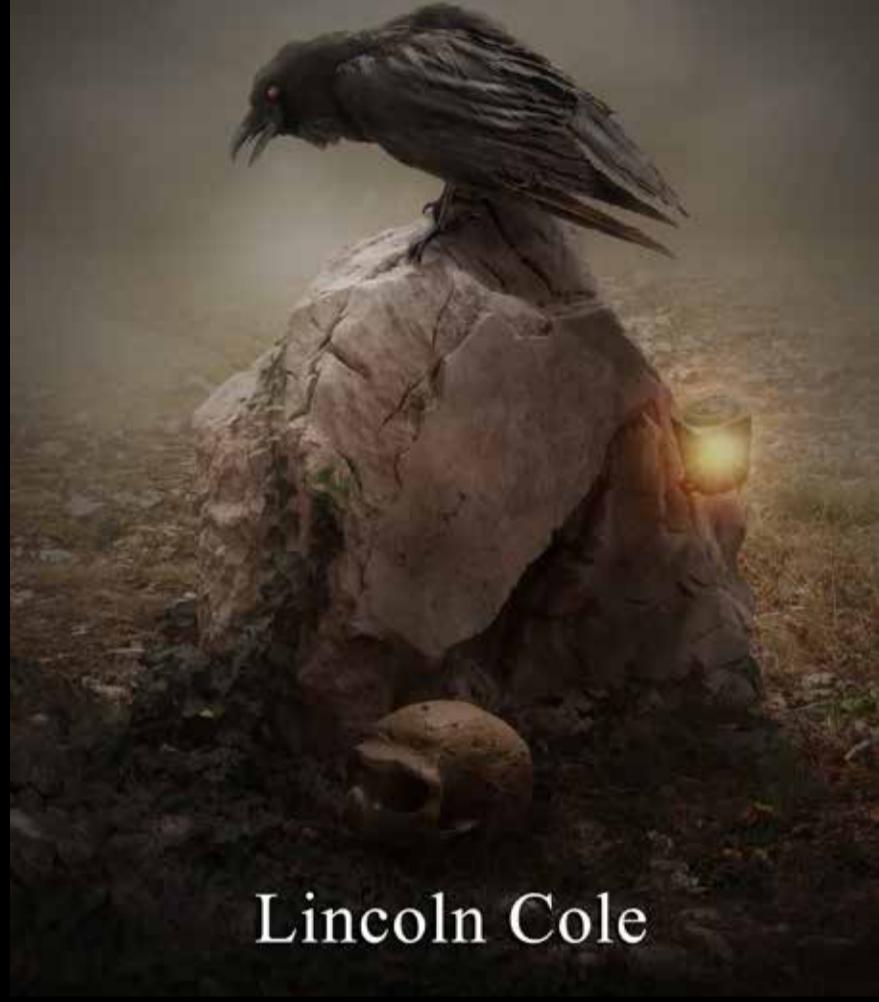
**CHANGING KEY**

**BY WILLIAM R. SOLDAN**



William R. Soldan received his BA in English Literature from Youngstown State University, where he was formerly the head fiction-editor of the student-run online literary magazine *Jenny*. He currently studies fiction and poetry in the Northeast Ohio MFA program and teaches English Composition at YSU. He is also a board member of the non-profit organization Lit Youngstown. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of publications such as *Sanitarium*, *New World Writing*, *The Vignette Review*, *Kentucky Review*, *Elm Leaves Journal*, *Thuglit* and others. He lives in Youngstown, Ohio, with his wife and son.

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# New Tricks

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# CASE #: 20987



## NEW TRICKS

BY IAN SPUTNIK

Colin dragged himself from his bed. He felt tired, as usual. Once he put his dressing gown on, with effort, he slowly worked his way down the stairs. He was greeted by the silly, waggy tailed man's best friend that was Dolly. Man's best friend, what a laugh. This was Debs' dog: Debs being his wife. She had to go into work early that morning, yet again. "Someone's got to put the bread on the table," she had explained.

The dog was ever present though. Not working, he had inherited the burden of looking after the little beast most days. The white and grey Chihuahua wagged its tail until it looked like it would knock itself off its feet. 'Stupid thing,' he thought to himself. "You want breakfast then?"

After feeding her, he made his way into the ground floor bathroom. He appraised himself in the mirror. 'Yep, I look like crap. Wash time I think.'

He ran the bath then tested the temperature with his hand. It was a bit too hot for his liking, so he decided to have a cigarette and let the water cool for a while, rather than adding cold water and then trying to circulate it to get an even temperature at both ends of the bath. That method never seemed to work

Dolly began to run round his feet in a fit of unwarranted excitement and affection. Colin then went to the front door to retrieve the mail from his post box. Nothing but bills and junk, but he played out the same routine every day none the less.

Outside the 'yobs' from next door were larking about and swearing at the top of their voices. "Scum," he muttered to himself. He could remember when this was a good neighbourhood, populated by respectable people who worked hard for a living. Not this new breed. The sort who lived off welfare. The kind who brought their kids up with the same morals (or lack of) as them. A generation of degenerates, which would have no more ambition in life than waiting for the next government cheque. Said remuneration would pop through their letterbox with the regularity as a normal pay packet. What was worse, they got housed in a property identical to his; a house that he had worked all his life to pay for. Now working people would have to pay tax just so 'they' would get the same housing for nothing; with the added inconvenience of 'them' living next door.

After dumping the mail into the bin he retreated to the bathroom, the water being a little bit cooler by then. He eased himself in, cooing gently to himself.

Laying there all his problems seemed to momentarily drift away. The loneliness of being at home without his wife didn't seem to weigh as heavily on his heart. He decided he would just relax for a while. Forget everything and start the day afresh.

He saw the unmistakable little white tip of Dolly's tail, from over the lip of the bath, as she waddled passed. He heard the lapping of her tongue as she nestled into his hand and licked at it. His useless arm hung outside the tub. She was always licking him. Sometimes he enjoyed the sign of affection, mostly it was just a bloody annoyance.

After a few minutes he saw her tail disappear out of the door as she retreated back to the living room. This gave him more time to think.

He would sort out his neighbours. No way in hell would he live next door to that trash.

On top of all that bullshit, the government had 'invited' him to a review of his current situation. 'Trying to cut my benefits,' he thought. How bloody dare they? He'd show them. A full life of working and paying into the system, while those layabouts just sponged off it and now probably received more money than him. Well, fuck that! It just wasn't right.

Colin heard Dolly come tip-tapping back into the bathroom and, dutifully, start to lap once again at his hand. Then the tap, tap bloody tapping as it scampered back into the living room. 'Just make your bleeding mind up, you useless mutt.' he thought.

'Things are going to change round here,' he decided. Then he said it out aloud, just for effect, half hoping his neighbours would hear him. This made him feel a bit better.

What was this country coming to? Wasters, living off the back of this country. Layabouts, raking in government handouts. Baby factory girls, enjoying the highlife; popping out kids left, right and centre.

None of this was fair. It wasn't his fault he now had to draw benefits. He had suffered a stroke five years earlier. This had left one side of his body completely numb. He needed a stick to walk and so was not a very attractive prospect for any potential employer. He couldn't believe that it was 'him' that the government wanted to financially penalise. No way José was that going to happen. Not on his watch. He might be down, but he wasn't out. They'd see just how much fight he had left in him.

He started feeling tired. 'Stop getting yourself so worked up,' he said to himself. 'Just bloody relax.' He sank

further into the bath. In his head he started to formulate a plan. He would strike back at the bureaucrats, those idiots that were in charge. The self-appointed pricks who thought themselves so above everyone else. He had worked hard for his home and damned if anyone one would try and force him out of it. He wasn't going to downsize just to make ends meet. As for the 'parasites' living next door, well he had plans for them too.

Dolly was breaking his concentration. She kept insisting on running in and out of the bathroom. He thought about yelling at her to settle down, but was too intent on plotting his campaign against his neighbours and the 'bureaucrats'. Also, he couldn't be bothered to use up any energy on her. At that moment even raising his voice seemed too much effort.

The morons next door were usually out for a few hours each day. This would give him time to sneak round and leave a nasty surprise for them. He could get in easily. The flimsy back door and inadequate locks on their property would make it child's play. Maybe cut the gas line to their cooker and wait for them to get home and flick the light switch on. The spark would be enough. No, that would never work. Well, it might, but he'd probably blow up his own house as well. As for sneaking, hobbling would be a more accurate assessment of his capabilities.

He slipped even further into the water. It edged its way up his face. He was so tired, so very tired. Everything was getting on top of him lately.

The colour had begun to drain from his face, and as his mouth and nose submerged, he didn't even have the energy to lift his head up above the waterline again.

Dolly came trotting back into the bathroom. She paused briefly before, tentatively, walking through the large puddle of blood that had begun to pool around the edge of the bathtub and looked up for another tasty treat. There was only one finger left on the bloody stump of her owner's hand. The bones were really difficult for her to bite off. She had managed, eventually, having had to chew through the flesh and muscle first. She licked her lips and set about gnawing on the little digit that remained. This one could be taken more easily. Then she would take it back to her dog basket to add it to the collection. She would finish stripping the flesh off of these later. She loved these new delicacies, especially the one with the shiny golden metal thing on it and, as she hadn't been shouted at, she knew she wasn't being bad.

She was enjoying this new game and deservedly so. Dolly was a good girl.

The End.

# CASE #20987

## NEW TRICKS

### BY IAN SPUTNIK



Ian Sputnik is a writer of horror and dark verse. Born and bred in South East England, he works in Canary Wharf, London. This is his seventh piece published in Sanitarium Magazine, the six previous being: *The Darkness*, *The Thing That Goes Bump in the Night*, *Meal Deal*, *Eyes*, *Night Terrors and Him*. He has also been published in Morpheus Tales with his piece *When Death Takes Hold* and in Devolution Z with *The Sinner's Swan Song*. Catch up with him on his website [www.iansputnik.com](http://www.iansputnik.com).



# The Legend Of Countess Creep

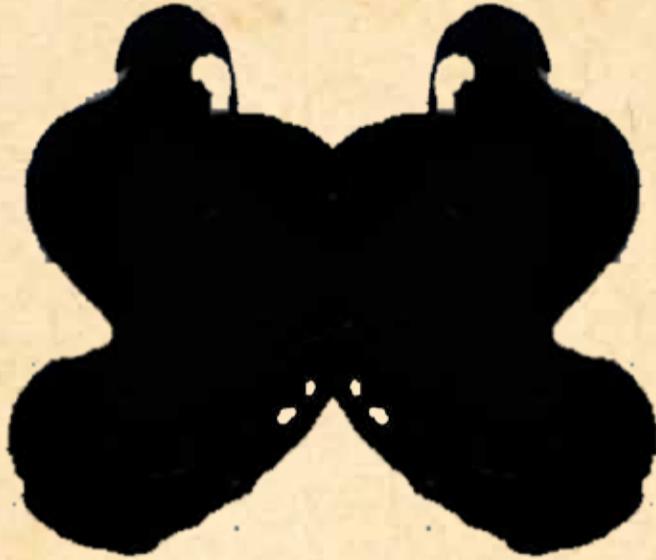
by Tawny Kipphorn

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#60344

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**CASE #: 60344**



# **THE LEGEND OF COUNTESS CREEP**

**BY TAWNY KIPPHORN**

Tell you I must the legend of Countess Creep

Whose spirit invades my mind as I sleep

It all began with a curious spell

Which gave birth to the legend I'm here to tell.

From atop the bloody mountain high

Which stands beneath the blackened sky

All have heard the suffering song

Of the Countess screaming ever-long.

Deep within cold chambers of stone

Dwells the horrid scarlet crone

Of whence took place her ghastly swathe

For in their blood she loved to bathe.

Pools of crimson leak the horrid truth

From the castle's hellish fountain of youth

Her sanguinary reign at last its end

But not before her spell was penned.

That whoever disturbed these very walls

Shall drown in her victims bloody falls

And when I stepped into her castle of hate

Her spell had sealed my unfortunate fate.

Forever I'm trapped within this castle of death

Until I take my final breath

For now I just continue to weep

As I await the return of Countess Creep.

**CASE #60344**

**THE LEGEND OF COUNTESS CREEP  
BY TAWNY KIPPHORN**



Tawny is a Speculative Fiction Author. She has been writing for nearly ten years, and is inspired by authors from the 1800's Romanticism period. She described her poetic style as "Seuss meets Poe". She has been published in Tales From the Shadow Realm Magazine, Inner Sins Webzine, Sanitarium Magazine, and The Creativity Webzine, and A Shadow of Autumn Halloween Anthology. She is currently in the process of putting together her first ever self-published Anthology of Dark Verse. For more information visit her blog at [www.darkdoorpassages.wordpress.com](http://www.darkdoorpassages.wordpress.com).



# Tragic Fate

by Austin Muratori

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#85779

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**CASE #: 85779**



# **TRAGIC FATE**

**BY AUSTIN MURATORI**

It was a cold and blustery November morning. I was looking out the window of the mediocre, three-bedroom house that my brother Mark and I received after the horrible slaughtering of our parents. I stood there, in the still dark, dining room just steps away from the front door, and gazed out at the grey, monstrous thunderhead combined with a tenacious whirlwind of rain. It was as if God himself was watching with grave disappointment in me for the awful crime that I had just committed. I was in deep remorse. My guilt was unbearable, like a hot air balloon constantly filling with pain, unconscious thoughts, and selfish acts. I truly wished my life would have turned out differently, but the choices I made ultimately made my fate inevitable.

Then, in the midst of my intense contemplating, a knock on the door broke my focus. Everything was standing still and quiet as if to make the dagger of the recent evil action penetrate and dig further into my chest, except for that one piercing, gut-retching sound. The knocking continued relentlessly at the elegant oak door as if it was a football team that was losing the game but they kept fighting. It wasn't a normal knocking sound, however. It sounded to me like a soft rumbling, a threatening, deep voice coming directly from Satan. It made my

heart start to disintegrate with every degrading chant:

"You're going to hell. Come to me. You shouldn't have killed him. Hahahaha." My mind raced back to the very beginning of the pain

All the pain and all the trouble began after the tragic death of my mom and dad. Before that, I was a relatively good kid. I was always getting good grades, and I was even captain of the varsity football team. I had the University of Wisconsin offering me a full four-year ride to play quarterback for them, and, to top everything off, I had a beautiful, amazing girlfriend. Unfortunately, that night my "life headlights" went out, and I missed the road to the right path. I took the exit that leads to an eternal life of evil, manipulation, and lies.

My dad was a pastor for the New Hope Ministries here in Flemingsburg, Wisconsin, and my mom was a nurse at St. Andrews Hospital. I would like to believe that they had a good marriage, but Mark and I knew better. In public some would say our family was better than the Brady Bunch, but behind closed doors it wasn't as it seemed. My parents were always getting into intense fights like one night my mom chased my dad around the house with a plunger all because the toilet was overflowing. My dad tried to let it slide and ignore it, but my mom would keep going. She was always looking for a fight and she really liked to mess with Mark. She was constantly nagging at him, saying, "You need to get a job, and cut your hair. You look like a devil child. When are you going to move out? You're almost twenty." Mark just let it go in one ear and out the other.

Along with mom's constant nagging, Dad would always preach to us, especially to Mark, that we had to do well and stay on the right path or we would go to hell. He always said, "You have to have Jesus, you have to have Jesus," but he never told us how to get Jesus.

My parents never had any enemies. Everyone seemed to get along with them, except for a guy that they were helping, a guy by the name of Beck Stanford. Beck was a local homeless man who lived in an ally between the pharmacy and Dave's Bar. Beck was a very hot-tempered man. If you even said one wrong word to him he would snap like a lion pouncing on a gazelle. He had shoulder length greasy brown hair that was covered by an old, stained John Deer trucker's hat. He wore a beer tainted dirty green and brown army camo coat with the name "Stanford" stitched on the right front side and kaki pants covered in holes. One night somebody ran up to his box in the ally and kicked it in. He jumped out of the box and chased after the hooded figure who Beck thought was me. The next day he went to the church and started yelling at my dad, saying he knew it was me that kicked his box and that he was going to kill me and any one who tried to stop him.

Viciously the heavy pounding on the door jutted me back from my memory. I crept over the dark red, rosewood floorboards that passed through the living room to the front door. With every step I took, I could see the seconds of my freedom start to wither and fade into the black abyss of passed time. When I arrived at the window right beside the big oak door, I slowly pulled back a small portion of the blinds. Four state police officers stood on the porch. The looks of terror painted on their faces took me back to that awful night.

I had just arrived home after the junior prom when I noticed something a little off about my house. The front door was slightly off its hinges like an old Vietnam War veteran with posttraumatic stress syndrome. I cautiously stepped up the stairs, and my veins ran cold. I pushed the crooked door open and entered my home. At that point, my heart was crumbling with each passing moment. The further and further I got into the house, the more the silent paranoia stepped in. The house was darker than a moonless, foggy night. As I walked through the hallway, I noticed something on the ground. It was an old John Deer hat. The fear in my body was built up so high it began to stream out my fingers like blood from a freshly gutted deer. My body rapidly began to shudder.

I entered the kitchen and was abruptly greeted with the smell of onions, spices, and something I hadn't smelt before: blood. I looked around to see if I could find a trace. However something urged me to continue on. I turned the corner behind the island, which contained our sink and dishwasher. Suddenly, the most horrific feeling that anyone could ever get came over me. It was a sensation of loneliness intact with a disgusted, sick feeling. What I saw changed my life forever. There lay my mom by the refrigerator with her head partially attached covered with blood and immense slash marks on her chest. About two feet away by the slider door, my father lay with his chest gutted and his entrails hanging out as if the killer was searching for something. With that, I stumbled backwards and passed out.

For months after that, my whole attitude changed. I dropped out of high school and traded my girlfriend for my two new friends: alcohol and heroine. Mark and I were given the house that I didn't want to live in. After about three years of drugs, the raw addiction finally paid its toll. One day I went to St. Andrews Hospital for my chronic back pain. By this time no one cared if I survived or not.

RING! RING! RING! I snapped back. I looked at the window again, and the police were still there. RING! RING! RING! I turned and ran to the little corner stand where the phone was located and picked it up.

I lay in the hospital bed after having been wheeled in from my cat scan. Mark showed up and sat with me for a couple of hours. I could hardly recognize him because I came into the emergency room with clothes that I had worn for three days, a full beard, and long shaggy hair, all dazed and confused. I was high.

"Hey, Jack. How are you feeling?"

"Okay now, I guess."

Before I could even get out all the words, an alarm went off, and the doctors and nurses started to scramble. A few seconds later, a yellow and black stretcher, guarded by four paramedics, was being rushed into my room. I looked over at the innocent stranger and instantly froze. It was Beck, the homeless man. I asked the nurse what happened, and she told me they found him outside the church parking lot, clothes all torn and reeking of Jack Daniels whiskey. She told me it was alcohol poisoning along with a heroin overdose.

Three minutes later his heart monitor flat lined, and he was dead. That really hit close to home, but yet I didn't seem to care when I looked at him. I turned to Mark; his big green eyes were bulged and glazed. He was like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Then, I interrupted his astonishment.

"Mark."

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Do you remember when Dad was preaching about Jesus and how we need Him?"

"Yeah, of course,"

"Well, did he ever tell you how to get Jesus?"

"Yeah, he never told you?"

"No, he didn't."

"Huh..."

"How do you get Him?"

"All you have to do is ask for..."

The doctor walked in before Mark could get out the words. "Jack Tills?"

"Hey, doc."

"We got your test results back, and, unfortunately, we found two massive tumors on your kidneys. They're

in a place where we can't remove them without taking your kidneys."

"So what can be done?"

"Sadly, nothing. We can put you on a transplant list; however, that takes a long time and... well, you only have one month left to live. We will notify you if we have any more information. Good luck."

Later that night, I sat in my dark pungent basement, and my mind started to race. I thought about the conversation I had with Mark and how I would get Jesus, and that I couldn't die. I needed to be forgiven. Then suddenly, something inside me snapped. I screamed up to God, "Why? Why are you doing this to me? Why did you give me cancer? God, if you are who every one says you are, then give me a sign." I waited and waited. With each passing second my anger and frustration started to simmer like boiling coffee left on the stove too long. When nothing happened, I realized I had to do something to save myself if I wanted to live. That's when I made my plans to kill the only person I knew who had the kidneys to match mine: Mark.

The next day when Mark got home from a long day at the sausage factory, I lured him to the basement by asking him if he could fix our furnace. After he got down the stairs, I picked up an aluminum baseball bat and was about to kill him. My blood started to calm, and I was on the verge of backing out, but I couldn't. I had to live; I had to make things right before I died. I couldn't die, so I needed his kidneys. CRACK! I hit him on the back of his skull as hard as I could. Blood went everywhere, and his body hit the floor. I knew it didn't kill him, so I hit him again and again. CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! That was it; the last hit cracked his skull and his brain seeped out.

RING. RING. RING.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jack Tills?"

"Yeah, this is Jack."

"I'm so sorry; we mixed up the results from your test."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You don't have cancer. I am terribly sorry."

After the nurse said that with deep sadness, my whole life ended. I was done for. I dropped the phone that was stained from my evil, bloody, life-taking fingers. I slowly made my way to the door. Immediately when I opened the door, the tall officer said, "Jack Tills," glancing at my bloody hands,

"You're under arrest."

The End.

# CASE #85779

## TRAGIC FATE

### BY AUSTIN MURATORI



Austin Muratori is a Writer, Filmmaker, Photographer, Musician and cancer survivor from a small town in Michigan. He is an avid reader who also happens to have an addiction to movies and junk food, especially Coca-Cola. He writes poetry, novels, short stories and screenplays of various genres his favorite being Horror/Suspense. Austin is constantly exploring new formats and genres in an effort to grow as a writer. As far as film goes Austin has been making films since he was 11 years old. Currently he is in his last year of film school at Full Sail University. He recently worked on a film titled "The End of the Tour" starring Jessie Eisenberg and Jason Segel and is due to be released in 2015. Another project he recently worked on is a feature horror film titled "Moorland" which premiered on October 20th 2014 with great success. It will be released on DVD and digital download in 2015! Feel free to check it out on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/MoorlandtheMovie?ref=bookmarks>

Austin is currently working on a few different projects. He is working on a short story called "Bleed" about a man who has an obsession with blood. He is also working on a short story and poem anthology along with a few different screenplays. There is a novel in the works as well.

Follow Austin on Twitter @AustinMuratori

Check out his website: <https://austinmuratori.wordpress.com>



# The Latch

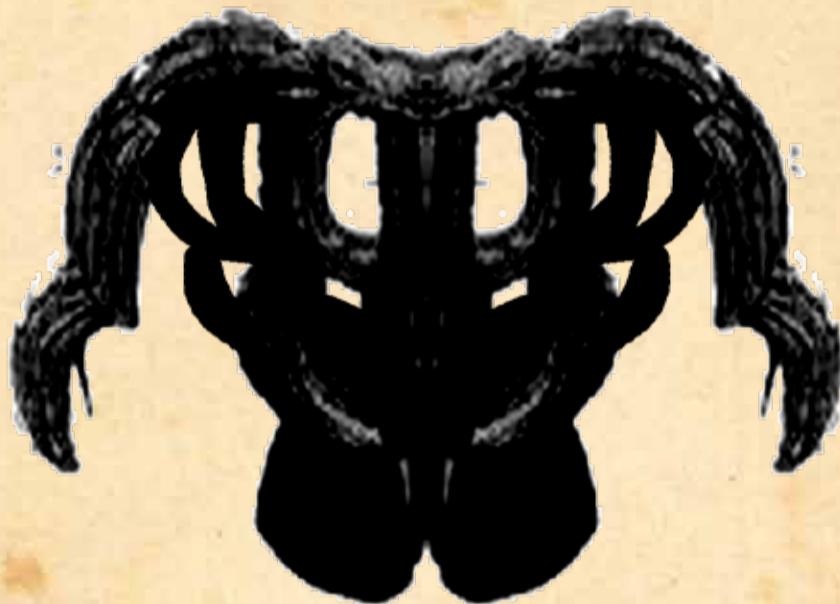
by Miracle Austin

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#38973

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**CASE #: 38973**



# **THE LATCH**

**BY MIRACLE AUSTIN**

Tara's gloved hand brushed over a jade metal box, as she was planting snapdragons in her grandmother's flowerbed. She tried to dig around it with the hand trowel, but it remained stationary in its tight spot. Her eyes focused on the box for several minutes; she began to dig the dirt from around the box with her hands.

The box finally popped out of its fitted home onto Tara's lap. She blew loose dirt off the top and some strange, shimmering letters and symbols appeared. She attempted to pronounce them out loud. Her hand explored the box, and she found a latch underneath. She turned it on that side and her fingers were guided to open it.

Her grandmother walked out the back door and shouted, "No, Tara! Stop!"

She jumped and tried to pull the latch down, but the latch forced itself open. It made a loud clicking noise with a deep growl, flew out of Tara's hands, and vanished.

Her grandmother walked over to her, placed her hand on Tara's shoulder, and fell down to the ground

on her knees. She buried her face into her lace apron and whispered, as tears splashed out of her eyes, "They'll come again...tonight..."

The End.

# CASE #38973

## THE LATCH BY MIRACLE AUSTIN



Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night and weekends. She's been writing since junior high and Drive by The Cars being one of her biggest inspirations.

She enjoys writing short stories with horror/suspense being her favorite genres; however, she's not limited to.

Her debut release was a YA/NA paranormal novel, Doll, which released on 2-14-16. Doll won the Purple Dragonfly Award 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Young Adult Fiction category 2016. Her second release will be a very eclectic collection of short stories of diverse themes--Boundless, to be released in the Winter of 2016.

She enjoys attending diverse book festivals and comic conventions, where she has been so honored to be one of the panelists on some. She hopes to conduct more author visits at junior high and high schools in the future. Miracle resides in Texas with her family.

Website: [www.miracleaustin.com](http://www.miracleaustin.com)

Email: [shadesoffiction@miracleaustin.com](mailto:shadesoffiction@miracleaustin.com)

Twitter: @MiracleAustin7

InstaGram: MiracleAustin7

Facebook: Miracle Austin Author

"Lingering fiction that ignites diverse mind journeys and beyond..."



# Descent

by Michelle L. Anderson

Physician: Dr. Peterson  
8268-WCT29

#28532

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**CASE #: 28532**



# **DESCENT**

**BY MICHELLE L. ANDERSON**

My thoughts  
a cemetery of crumbling gravestones  
inscriptions fading  
feigning light as they dissipate.

Not silver  
or gold  
but a strangling fog that shades memory  
and lessens recall.

Quiet chaos  
the polite introduction  
to raging silence.  
Insanity makes a soft sound

upon arrival,  
more tiptoeing giant  
than forcible threat,  
treading lightly  
so as not to disturb too abruptly  
the lingering lucidity beneath.

The monster sees you  
even when you won't see it.

The internal scream  
no one else can hear,  
shattering brittle thoughts  
and crashing them down  
onto what little concrete is left  
of my mind.

Numbness finds a path  
through an unwanted needle  
to quell the futile swirl  
with a swift  
pneumatic  
*swoosh.*

# CASE #28532

## DESCENT

### BY MICHELLE L. ANDERSON



Michelle Anderson is a short story author and novelist from Central Illinois. She has been published in *The Long Ridge Review*, *Flashes in the Dark* and *Sanitarium Magazine*, and is currently working on a high-concept fantasy novel in which our dark sides aren't just in our heads - they walk among us. When she's not coming up with delectably devilish ways to scare the hell out of her readers, she can be found restoring her 1880 Victorian farmhouse with her husband Joe, creating art of all kinds in her studio, or working in her garden (which would be a great place to bury the bodies, if only the dog would quit digging them up). Pay a visit to her website - [michelleanderson.com](http://michelleanderson.com) - to see what other madness seeps out of her gray matter and onto the page.

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